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The Role of Idealism in Shaping Authoritarianism in Russian Socialism: Vissarion Belinsky and Alexander Herzen

by

Miranda Turner

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in History

Department of History & Classics

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ABSTRACT

One of the most powerful arguments in history is that liberty can be achieved through force, a by-product of idealistic strategies for the future. By examining the noble ideals of the Russian intelligentsia, it becomes apparent that idealism, insidious for its innocence and good intentions, led Russia to a communist dictatorship. The goals of this thesis are to uncover early idealism by contrasting Belinsky's compassionate social conscience and Herzen's profound views on socialist liberty with the inherent conflict between freedom of choice and forced development. The thesis is intended to demonstrate that Soviet authoritarianism was predetermined by idealism, a force capable of substantial change and easily corrupted by overarching devotion and the incompatibility of ideals such as absolute equality with free will. While Belinsky represents the purity of early idealism and the beginnings of authoritarian inclinations, Herzen depicts an awareness that idealism is capable of driving men to unjustifiable action.

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I) Introduction: The Role of Idealism in Shaping Authoritarianism in Russian Socialism

Martin Malia writes that an ideal type of socialism is the DNA of a unicorn, the composite sum of contradictory policies that can exist separately but not together in society.[1] Isaiah Berlin writes along similar lines, that ideal concepts of fraternity, equality, and liberty are beautiful but inherently incompatible in life.[2] These historians are the first to put forth the idea that Russian socialism is flawed not for its mechanics but for its idealism. Can one expect total equality and total liberty to exist simultaneously in society? Is an ideal society able to respect free will? Or is idealism simply a recipe for authoritarian rule? This thesis takes a new perspective on the origins of the communist dictatorship and asserts that the idealism of the original members of the intelligentsia contributed to the authoritarianism of the Soviet regime. The thesis also recognizes two themes in regards to the fallibility of idealism: firstly, the incompatibility of ideals such as equality and liberty, and secondly, the overarching devotion these ideals inspire. Both of these themes lead to coercive force in the implementation of idealistic political strategies, as in the Soviet-era slogan: "With an Iron Fist, We Will Lead Humanity to Happiness."[3] Through the lives of two early idealists, this thesis intends to demonstrate that Soviet authoritarianism was predetermined by idealism, which is capable of inspiring blind devotion towards causes which may not be possible due to the conflict between freedom and forced development. The concept of idealism or absolute idealism is defined as "the desire for, or pursuit of the ideal or highest standard, free from imperfection" and authoritarianism can be considered a state of being whereby blind submission to authority is exercised or favoured.

Historians have failed to recognize the authoritarian tendencies latent in the early ideals of the intelligentsia evidenced in blind devotion, and how the inherent contradiction between liberty and forced behaviour affects a proposed utopian society. The historiography of pre-revolutionary socialist thought leading to the development of communism, has focused largely on the mechanics of implementation, and the weakness

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[1] Martin Malia. Russia Under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 252, 256.

[2] Isaiah Berlin in Michael Ignatieff. Isaiah Berlin: A Life (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998), p.202.

[3] This slogan was posted on a sign at the Solovetsky Islands prison camp in the early 1920s. Cited in The New Yorker Magazine: "Seasons In Hell," a review by David Remnick (April 14, 2003), p. 77.

of both theory and organization. However, while socialism itself has been on trial for the failures of the Soviet regime, little credit has been assigned to the ideals behind the socialist cause. And yet, any political system can fall prey to the machinations of absolute idealism and end up a dictatorship despite the best of intentions. Nearly every system extols a set of ideals and then considers itself the ultimate solution in human relations (and every system possesses similar ideals for who does not praise liberty and equality at least on the surface?). It must be remembered that the noblest ideals of modern man produced the totalitarian rule of Stalin, and that Russians relinquished their freedoms in the name of socialist liberty. And thusly, it is to those ideals and the devotion they inspire that historians should look when examining the root causes of ideological rigidity. It is to those ideals that this thesis credits the outcome of the Russian Revolution, an event that held great hopes for the future but whose basis in idealism predetermined Soviet authoritarianism.

This thesis takes a new philosophical perspective on an old theme, the origins of communism, and seeks to examine the root idealism of early Russian socialist thinkers as a contributing factor on the path to a communist dictatorship. When examining the nineteenth-century intelligentsia, historians typically focus on their social and political conditions and the reasons fuelling their revolutionary aspirations. They do not focus on the ideals themselves, such as liberty and equality, as a precursor to an authoritarian state, but solely on the conditions leading to those ideals. The ideals are glossed over as subjective and are not viewed as the roots of dissension but rather the effects of that dissension, and as a result, are lumped in with the concrete events of revolutionary history, when they should in fact be separated from the prism of socialism and dissected for their meaning. In other words, the ideals, while leading to socialism, are also irrespective of that particular political system. This is an oversight in Russian intellectual history, for idealism contributed to the complete devotion that begot the violent implementation of a one-size-fits-all definition of liberty that could have ended in another political system, but which favoured socialism as the most idealistic. This thesis examines early socialist idealism for several things: the purity of the original ideals, the strength of early hope, the contradictions between ideals, and above all, the tell-tale warning signs that totalitarianism was in the works: frustration, despair, and promotion of force. In particular, the social conscience of Vissarion Belinsky and the origins of peasant socialism in Alexander Herzen are examined as polar positions of the same idealistic pitfalls. Belinsky, a man tortured by human suffering, advocated out rightly that men

should be led "forcibly to happiness."[4] He had little sense of where his blind devotion would lead the nation; he knew only of the purity of his ideals and his desperation to see them in place. Herzen, on the other hand, recognized the contradictions of idealism, regarding the triumph of any ideal as the triumph of tyranny for how is liberty able to succeed when equality must be enforced? Although he issued repeated warnings to this effect, even he could not refrain from clinging resolutely to beliefs that in the end were incompatible with aspirations towards liberty. And it is important to note that Russian socialism, unlike its Marxist counterpart, was originally concerned as much with personal liberty as with social equality.[5] Throughout this thesis, reference is made to two sets of the intelligentsia: firstly, the contemporaries of Belinsky and Herzen, the intellectuals of the "remarkable decade" of 1848 to 1858, as providing inspiration, and secondly, to those who followed, the progressive thinkers of the 1860s and 1870s who began to display the authoritarianism of later times. For purposes of clarity, the first set is referred to as the 'intelligentsia' and the second set as the 'revolutionary intelligentsia,' as the latter group pursued action while the former pursued speculation. Although the term "intelligentsia" has been assigned many definitions, simply put, they were a group of intellectuals interested in ideas and in political, social and economic theorizing, that formed a type of informal social class in Russia during the nineteenth century, one apart from hereditary rank or economic status.

It is not the intent of this thesis, however, to ignore or dispute the historical conditions commonly cited in leading to communism, such as Russia's traditional preoccupation with centralized leadership, evidenced in centuries of divine right absolutism, and communal social structures in the peasant commune (*obshchina*) and workers' collectives (*artel*). Nicolas Berdyaev identified a greater historical force at work when he argued that socialism was rooted in Russia's history, and that the national character was opposed to the egocentricity of Western political and economic

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[4] V.G. Belinsky. Selected Philosophical Works (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956), pp. 165-166.

[5] This issue of personal liberty in a socialist society is unique to Russian socialism and is addressed further in the chapters on Belinsky and Herzen with regards to their philosophical development towards the fate of individual man. Dostoyevsky said of Belinsky many years after his death: "He believed... that socialism not only does not destroy the freedom of the individual personality but, on the contrary, restores it to unheard of splendour, on new and this time adamantine foundations." Isaiah Berlin. Russian Thinkers (London: The Hogarth Press, 1978), p. 172.

institutions.[6] The recurring triumvirate in Russian history, officially proclaimed in the reign of Nicholas I, was autocracy, orthodoxy and nationality or community (*sobornost'* meaning unity or brotherhood), implying an inherent historical preoccupation with sanctioned despotism above a collective society. Almost a century of heated discussion and anticipation preceded the Russian revolution, and the choice of socialism for the revolutionary transformation of the nation, and the devotion socialism inspired, may be considered part and parcel of Russian history and the spirit of the Russian people. While this may account for Russia's choice of socialism, and to some extent, the authoritarian nature of its outcome, there is a deeper framework of idealism at work in Russian history. As early as 1510, Russia had predicted for herself a spiritual role in leading the world to an ideal future: according to the famous 'Third Rome theory,' Moscow was the third spiritual centre (after Rome and Constantinople) and there would be no fourth.[7] A sacred significance has lingered in the Russian subconscious ever since, mingled with guilt for the obvious contradictions in the nation's despotic behaviour. Serfdom, in particular, had an agonizing effect on the intelligentsia's conscience; a terrible cognizance is discerned on behalf of those who understood that as long as Russia held her people in slavery the nation would never progress beyond her medieval heritage or live up to her Christian ideal. A sincere examination of Russia's past and identity generated the preoccupation with socialism in the nineteenth century, for it was the only political solution capable of atoning for Russia's despair and guilt over her perceived wretchedness, while encompassing a bright future based on her identity as a historically naïve and fresh nation with lessons in humility. The intelligentsia dismissed constitutional reform and representative institutions in favour of a utopian and spiritual political system based on the weight of their conscience (Russian liberalism was too soft to firmly address social problems and too sophisticated to appeal to the common man despite the intellectual abilities of men such as Granovsky and Kavelin).[8] The driving force behind the love of

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[6] Nicolas Berdyaev. The Russian Idea. Trans. R.M. French. (London: Centenary Press, 1947), p. 98.

[7] In 1510, Abbot Filofei of Pskov in a letter to Vasili III wrote: "Two Romes fell down, the third [Moscow] is standing, and there will be no fourth." He considered Moscow the true centre of Christianity, after the fall of Rome and Byzantium's union with Rome in 1439. David Mackenzie and Michael W. Curran. A History of Russia, the Soviet Union, and Beyond. 4th Edition. (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1993), p. 147.

[8] "It is most important to note that the liberal tradition has always been weak in Russia and that we have never had a liberalism with moral authority or which gave any inspiration... they (the liberals) produced no theory whatever, a thing which the Russian intelligentsia always

destruction was love for Russia and this dichotomy between violence and idealism should be recognized and explored further; as Pechorin wrote, "How sweet to hate one's own native land and eagerly await its annihilation."[9]

Simply put, idealists refute free will; they are unable to accommodate dissenting viewpoints because their ideals are akin to absolute truth without relativity, for how can anyone disagree with the truth (no doubt this question was asked repeatedly during the Soviet era)? If one wants ideal equality, then why settle for a lesser or diluted version? The road to authoritarianism was paved when the intelligentsia disregarded the co-existence of multiple sets of ideals (how can the true vision succeed, if one settles for an alternate lesser vision?). Herzen himself, the "father of Russian socialism," wrote,

> There are scarcely any diseases more stubborn than idealism... The idealists are cowards when faced with the truth. You turn it down, you are afraid of the reality at variance with your theories. You think that there is no salvation for the world but in the ways you have discovered. You would like the world to dance to your tune in exchange for your devotion. And as soon as you notice that it has its own steps and rhythm you grow angry, despair and have not even the curiosity to watch the dancing.[10]

Truly this warning to the intelligentsia sums up Russia's fate on the road to a utopian society, as only one set of ideals was permitted and there could be no salvation except one of the revolutionaries' choosing. In direct violation of the original sentiment of those chosen ideals, free will was bent to a single vision and measures of force and repression were considered valid to secure a cause so noble. But the fact remains that if a man is forced to be free and equal, his freedom to choose has already been compromised. This thesis argues that the intelligentsia should have been wary of the assertion that it was possible to liberate through force, or at the very least should have been aware of the illogical reasoning behind it, but rather they were caught in this fallacy of idealism. The Soviet Union is a good example of the consequences of such thinking. In the nineteenth century, Russia began with noble hopes for liberty and equality and ended in the twentieth century with a repressive, propaganda-driven dictatorship operating in the name of ideology. If historians are to understand how this transition took place in Russia, they must examine the origins of authoritarianism in absolute idealism and, above all, recognize the innocence and pure intentions behind the early stages of that idealism.

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needs" Berdyaev. The Origin of Russian Communism. Trans. R. M. French. (London: Geoffrey Bles Ltd., 1937), pp. 35-36.

[9] Pechorin in Berdyaev, *The Origin of Russian Communism*, p. 27.

[10] Alexander Herzen. Selected Philosophical Works (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956), pp. 392-393.

While the fallibility of idealism is not unique to Russia, it provides a clear historical example of the translation of noble hopes into authoritarian rule.

This thesis focuses on the lives and works of Belinsky and Herzen as the most effective method of illustrating the basis and allure of their ideals. The study of the Russian intelligentsia has largely been biographical, and it is difficult to do otherwise when approaching the subject since Russian socialism did not evolve in open society but rather in small philosophical circles. Situating idealism in lives of these two individuals also gives it more meaning and significance than to speak generally about the idealism of the intelligentsia as a group. Belinsky and Herzen were selected out of a larger group of the intelligentsia specifically because Belinsky's naïve idealism is more pronounced than any other, and because Herzen's warnings against idealism are directly linked to the conflicting nature of ideals. Added to this, the intellectual development of both individuals speaks to the development of Russia as a whole, as the reasoning that led these men personally to socialism also led the nation's conscience to the same conclusion. And this was the case for both rich and poor, since Belinsky represented the rage of the *raznochintsy* ("men of various ranks," regarded as having low social origins, outside of the gentry), and Herzen represented the guilt of the nobility. Each person for their own reasons wanted to ameliorate Russia's suffering and they took the same intellectual path by promoting ideals that were lacking in Russian life and supporting socialism as the only system capable of achieving them.

However, their sincere idealism fostered a level of devotion to socialism that proved capable of overthrowing not only the regime but also the original spirit of liberty. As Isaiah Berlin wrote: "Nothing, perhaps, alters ideas so much as total dedication to them, and the attempts (which spring from this state of mind and feeling) to achieve a unity of theory and practice."[11] Socialism became the ultimate solution and the only correct way to live and the transition to this dogmatic assertion began when Belinsky insisted that the day when there would be no rich and poor, no Tsar and subjects, when people would be brothers, was too important to idly pursue.[12] While Herzen insisted the transformation to socialism could come peacefully, once Russia was enlightened enough

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[11] Isaiah Berlin. "*Russian Thought and the Slavophile Controversy*," Slavonic and East European Review 1981 59 (4): p. 573.

[12] V.G. Belinsky, *Selected Philosophical Works*, pp. 165-166. "There will be neither rich nor poor, neither kings nor subjects, there will be brethren, there will be men... And that will be effected through sociality. And hence there is no object more noble and lofty than to contribute towards its progress and development."

to embrace it of its own free will, devotion to the socialist cause became more important than fulfilling the sentiment of the original ideals. There was little time to waste in idle speculation, for the intelligentsia were lodged between an oppressive, unimaginative government engaged in serfdom and repressive systems of justice and education, and a boundless population of illiterate and downtrodden Russian peasants. The intelligentsia stood as a small separate class, painfully aware of the principles of liberty without the means of engaging them. And in this situation of frustrated idealism, the revolutionary intelligentsia became so devoted to human liberty that, with a few exceptions, they did not bother with the ramifications of their authoritarian prescriptions for mankind: "People do not understand that if a man, while despising himself, respects anything else, he surely reduces himself to dust before the object, becomes its slave."[13] The revolutionary intelligentsia were confined to the limits of their ideals, and could not build the walls of a free society out of the prison of idealism, which had led them to believe in the absolute correctness of their vision and hence to advocate mechanisms of force.

This thesis locates Soviet ruthlessness in the idealism of early revolutionaries, a topic that has been hinted at and suggested by men such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Isaiah Berlin, and recently Martin Malia, but never has been examined outright with the intent to uncover the innocence of idealism as the hallmark of authoritarian behaviour. Perhaps this is due to the intangible nature of ideals and idealism, or perhaps there are simply so many reasons for the Revolution and its aftermath, that it is difficult to decide what was most influential. The very innocence of idealism renders it a powerful force in determining historical direction, and therefore the ideals of the intelligentsia deserve closer examination. Edward Acton, in *Rethinking the Russian Revolution*, assigns four schools of historiography to the study of the Russian intelligentsia: liberal, libertarian, revisionist and Soviet, which range their significance from over-idealization to complete irrelevance.[14] In order to understand how the study of Belinsky and Herzen has been treated in the past, it is necessary to briefly examine each of these approaches. Each historiographical school has merit and valid points of view; however, liberal historians, who will be examined lastly, have come nearest to recognizing the authoritarian

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[13] T.N. Granovsky in Edward Acton. Alexander Herzen and the Role of the Intellectual Revolutionary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 21.

[14] Edward Acton, Rethinking the Russian Revolution (London: Edward Arnold Press, 1990), pp. 83-106. Acton appears to be largely sympathetic to the revisionist point of view.

tendencies lurking within the ideals of the intelligentsia. In each case it is noted whether this thesis refutes or supports these assertions.

The Soviet school of historiography was quite obviously based on the root belief that class struggle is at the basis of movements in history. The intelligentsia were believed to be the voice of the exploited masses and therefore their ideals were held to be those of the people at large. They represented the peasantry, increasingly so as the *raznochintsy*, or men of various ranks, entered the universities and philosophical circles in larger numbers. The intelligentsia adopted their ideals in response to a repressive regime and devised a utopian system of peasant socialism to take Russia back to the idyllic time of the *obshchina* or peasant commune, an instinctively socialist form of organization. Although their theories were believed to be utopian and misguided, favouring peasant socialism over Marxism, the intelligentsia are given credit by Soviet historians for their revolutionary aspirations, political organization, and moral integrity. In other words, they offered the task of revolution to their successors, who then took up the cause more effectively by commanding the power of the proletariat through Marxism. And, in fact, populist ideology had truly failed to inspire agrarian support and the resulting disillusionment with the peasantry had rather kindled an appreciation for Marxism and the working-class as a means of inciting revolution. The Soviets framed the activities of the intelligentsia in Marxist ideology and an awareness of class struggle, assuming that early socialist theories were proto-Marxian impulses destined to evolve as they did, despite the fact that many revolutionaries supported peasant socialism and were either ambivalent or in direct opposition to Marxism even into the twentieth century. In linking communism to what were very disparate early visions of liberty, Soviet historians chose to glorify select aspects of their predecessors' thought, thereby legitimizing the regime by taking liberties regarding the intentions and aims of the intelligentsia. Soviet historiography does not permit an alternate vision of how events might have turned out had Herzen's brand of socialism been given a chance to evolve. To this way of thinking, there was no other possible way for events to unfold as explained by the tenets of Marxist theory. Accounting for authoritarianism as a consequence of early idealism was not considered, for there was never any need to question the outcome of communism. In other words, the path of history evolved as it should have, and whether Belinsky's passion for social justice or Herzen's hope for humanity inspired rigidity and fanaticism was not worth considering. Soviet historians were not seeking answers to how high hopes for humanity devolved into Stalinism, and were not seeking to prevent this devolution from occurring

again in some other well-meaning society by understanding the root impulses of the communist experiment. They used the pure ideals of Belinsky and Herzen to legitimize communism but would not use them to understand the failures of communism as this thesis seeks to do in recognizing the authoritarian impulses latent in absolute idealism.

Libertarian historians reject the view that the intelligentsia spoke for the masses and that their ideals were dearly held by the downtrodden Russian people leading them to revolution.[15] They also reject the notion presented by liberal historians that the intelligentsia were rather alienated from the Russian people and from political life in general. Libertarians reflect on the lack of economic opportunities for the intelligentsia in light of rising capitalism. The forces of both tradition and modernity were stacked against the intelligentsia for the tsarist regime feared their talent and the burgeoning capitalist economy had no use for it, and their abilities were often squandered in inefficient bureaucracy or artistic impotence. The intelligentsia had little choice but to endorse a new society based on their own expertise and knowledge of democratic principles, and while humane desires to end suffering may have been genuine, their interest in the peasantry, and later the working class, was largely practical since the intelligentsia did not possess the means of inciting revolutionary change. The masses were mobilized in favour of a political and social vision that in the end served the needs of the intelligentsia more acutely than those of Russia's peasants. Their ideals were adopted in order to draw the support of the downtrodden to what was truly the intelligentsia's own crusade for economic viability. Finding fault with both autocratic politics and burgeoning capitalism, purely for reasons of their perceived uselessness in either system, the intelligentsia demanded a society in which their "intellectual capital" not only held value but also allowed them control. A society organized along rational and humane principles would require their intellectual guidance at every step. The intelligentsia wanted to be involved in economy and government and so they endeavoured to create roles for themselves in a new Russia based on their own idealism. Libertarian historians reflect on the need of the intelligentsia to re-shape society without recognizing that their authoritarian tendencies might have arisen from their own unwieldy ideals of

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[15] For a discussion on the libertarian view, see Acton pp. 94-97. Acton cites libertarian sources including: G. Konrad and I. Szelenyi, *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power* (Brighton, 1979); R. Gombin, *The Radical Tradition. A Study in Modern Revolutionary Thought* (London, 1978); D.H. Lasswell and D. Lerner, eds., *World Revolutionary Elites* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965); P. Corrigan, H. Ramsay, and D. Sayer, *Socialist Construction and Marxist Theory* (London, 1978).

pure equality and liberty rather than from an overt lust for power or self-worth, one largely at odds with their prescriptions for Russia. Their prescriptions were undoubtedly elitist, and their own participation in engineering revolution an exhilarating bonus to be sure, but their underlying motivation for a better world must have been sincere in order to inspire such rabid devotion, that of their own and of their successors. Strength of conviction started the movement towards totalitarianism. The intelligentsia, particularly Belinsky and Herzen, possessed an idealism that was so startlingly absolute that their successors lost sight of its original purpose and latched instead onto fulfillment at all costs. If economic and political power were the chief aim of the intelligentsia in inspiring a revolution, it is doubtful they would have chosen socialism, in theory the most egalitarian system ever devised, as the medium for their power-lust.

Revisionist historians take the point of view that a few intellectual giants, such as Belinsky and Herzen, did not represent the rank-and-file members of the intelligentsia whose efforts were less documented and perhaps less extraordinary.[16] Not only are the intelligentsia as a class and as a special entity demythologized but theses such as this one are called into question for assuming the influence of particular individuals on the goals of the masses. As Acton points out, the revolutionary intelligentsia emerge neither as superheroes nor as demons, but simply as funnels for the peoples' aspirations, as expressed in student protests and peasant uprisings.[17] The intelligentsia did not develop socialist ideas but rather directed them into action through political propaganda and organization. Their role was modest at the time and has been given pre-eminence by the survival of their writings and their idealization by the Soviets. The key to this school of historiography is the interaction between ideology and popular support, not unlike the timeless adage of the chicken and the egg. Was ideology shaped by popular support or was it the other way around? While this thesis seeks to emphasize ideology in the leading role, and hence the lives and works of its leading proponents, revisionist historians would claim that these thinkers harmonized their viewpoints with the aspirations of the masses rather than vice versa. Certainly it is true that there was more at work in this

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[16] For a discussion on the revisionist view, see Acton, himself a revisionist, pp. 97-106. Acton cites several sources including: D.R. Brower, *Training the Nihilists. Education and Radicalism in Tsarist Russia* (Cornell, 1975); S.D. Kassow, *Students, Professors, and the State in Tsarist Russia* (Berkeley, Cal., 1989); N. Naimark, *Terrorists and Social Democrats. The Russian Revolutionary Movement under Alexander III* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983); A.K. Wildman, *The Making of a Workers' Revolution. Russian Social Democracy, 1891-1903* (Chicago, 1967).

[17] Acton, *Rethinking the Russian Revolution*, p. 106.

revolutionary phenomenon than the charisma of a few individuals. Revolutionary ideals and theories abounded throughout Russia at this time, especially in the universities, and therefore it is difficult to know who was affecting whom in the development of socialist aspirations. There is obvious evidence of evolution in Russian socialist theory from an early idyllic image of peasant socialism to more sophisticated economic theories on the path to Marxism, indicating a level of interplay with the undercurrents of revolutionary activity. However, historians are uncertain about how much contact the intelligentsia had with the peasant masses; while liberals claim they were isolated from real life, revisionists note that intellectuals gained first-hand knowledge through agitation in the villages, notably in the Populist movement. There is much research to be done on the rank-and-file members of the intelligentsia, a perhaps indefinable and elusive group given the circumstances of police surveillance and censorship, but it is fair to say that the revolutionary intelligentsia *as a whole* to a certain extent directed the aspirations of the peasants and the workers into socialism whether of the populist or Marxist variety. It can also be said then, that the spokesmen of the intelligentsia, their publicists and their theoreticians, directed to a certain extent the aspirations of the rank-and-file members, at least until the 1880s when the intelligentsia were superseded and the movement began to take on a revolutionary life of its own. While there was undoubtedly an interplay of ideology between those closest to the masses and those theorizing for their welfare, the lofty ideals of men such as Belinsky and Herzen lent a higher purpose to the operation as a whole, raising the bar from the mere well-being of the peasants into an almost religious vision of harmonized relations. The purpose of this thesis then is to focus on the lofty ideals of the intelligentsia and their influence in shaping absolute devotion to the socialist cause, and therefore the leading figures who supremely voiced the ideals serve a vital role. The extent of their influence on the movement in its entirety, at least in terms of absolute idealism, can be considered to be significant.

As noted, liberal historians have come nearest to recognizing the tyranny latent in the pure aspirations of the intelligentsia; the elitism expressed by some *intelligentsy* in their prescription for society's ailments is construed as dictatorial and in keeping with later developments.[18] Liberal historians also assign a greater importance to the

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[18] For a discussion on the liberal view, see Acton pp. 88-94. Acton cites liberal sources including: M. Malia; R.V. Daniels, *Red October* (London, 1967); V. Nahirny, *The Russian Intelligentsia: From Torment to Silence* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1983); A. Besancon, *The*

intelligentsia than the other schools of historiography. However, their insight into the role of idealism in shaping a dictatorial future ends with the root causes of that idealism for the intelligentsia are examined for their psychological motivation and their idealism is viewed as a product of isolation. That personal deficiency leads to fanatical conviction and fanciful ideology, sums up liberal treatment of the intelligentsia and their idealism. The intelligentsia are viewed as misfit souls living in dark Russia without a forum for free thought and expression, who wholeheartedly swallowed fantastic philosophical schemes, and who perhaps are deserving of pity for their belief in an obviously flawed political system. It is endearing that the intelligentsia desired to atone for their privileged lives and for Russia's failures by improving the wretched lot of millions of peasants, but by that token socialism represented nothing more than their own tormented collective conscience and therefore lacked the foundation of a genuinely worthy political movement; as Orlando Figes wrote: "Guilt was the psychological inspiration of the revolution."[19] The credibility of socialism as a whole, in all its forms and variations, has been undermined to a great extent, and even now after the Cold War no one wishes to revisit the issue of its viability especially in its most idyllic form. Liberal historians have viewed the ideals of the intelligentsia sympathetically but nevertheless with little faith in theories considered to be the product of alienation from a class deprived of an outlet for their energies and talent. The intelligentsia are sympathetic but misguided. There is little discussion, except in limited cases, about the consequences of idealism except to note that prescriptions for liberty are, by their very nature as prescriptions, dictatorial. That the intelligentsia knew what the peasants needed better than they knew themselves, appears often in liberal historiography. As true as that is, it does not account for how the pure vision of men like Belinsky and Herzen went significantly astray. Again, the answer falls to flaws in theory and organization, with an underlying assumption that the intelligentsia were ridiculous to believe in a perfect world, but the answer has never been satisfactorily given as to why it was ridiculous. Why could there not be a utopian society of perfect liberty, equality and fraternity? The answer lies in the absolute view taken towards the ideals themselves, for if the ideals must be perfect then mankind, in its less-than-perfect state, must be forced into alignment. Supreme devotion to ideals is treated by liberal historians in the

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Intellectual Origins of Leninism (Oxford, 1981); A. Ulam; A. Gleason; R.E. Pipes; and P. Pomper.

[19] Orlando Figes. A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution: 1891-1924 (Penguin Books, 1998).

mechanical sense, particularly regarding the organization and methodology of the revolutionaries as a disciplined, militant, highly-centralized authority imposing its will upon Russia, but there is little treatment given to the effect of devotion on the ideals themselves. The result of devotion on an instrumental level was the ideological revolutionary epitomized by Lenin, the fanatical disciple of the movement who viewed the world in stark terms of black and white without distinction, without feeling or scruple to "soften his commitment." Nikolai Chernyshevsky outlined this extreme revolutionary in the late nineteenth century as a model for emulation, casting every aspect of social life as either for the revolution or against in his novel *What is to be Done?* (a title later adopted by Lenin). However, what had happened to the original ideals in this process? How were they altered? How were the noble ideals of Belinsky and Herzen twisted to include a party vanguard assuming power in the name of the people and forcibly creating a socialist system that included none of the original impulses of humanity? It is often claimed that the ideals were discarded in favour of "revolution for revolution's sake" but, on a group level, this is inherently illogical for even if massive change were the only goal, that change had to involve some inkling of an ideal. Perhaps the revolutionaries discovered, even unconsciously, that *perfect* liberty, equality and fraternity for all people (and the key here is *perfect* for the intelligentsia's commitment to these ideals was relentless and unforgiving of anything less than ultimate forms), was incompatible at this stage in human evolution and therefore the revolutionaries were forced to transfer their devotion from ideals to devotion itself and thus to become and remain enforcers for the next century. The ideals, once found to be incompatible and unworkable (since the people would not spontaneously experience a revolution in human behaviour, deciding of their own volition to behave towards one another as brothers), left behind only a devotion to being devoted, and the shape of socialism mattered less than if it were properly enforced.

Ideals and idealism are subjective and therefore are a difficult area of study in history, a discipline focused, and rightly so, on the collection and interpretation of factual evidence. In all the schools of historiography, the *objective* role of the intelligentsia is given more weight than the *subjective* role; or rather their hopes and feelings are considered less important to later historical developments than their physical involvement

in events.[20] For example, Herzen's work in publishing an émigré revolutionary journal is considered part of his objective role leading to the Revolution, and while his ideas are considered important, they do not command equal attention as psychological events unto themselves due to their subjective nature. Yet the fact remains that subjective and objective influences are a package deal in shaping the tides of history and they cannot be separated for purposes of accuracy and tidiness despite the best intentions. It is no secret that subjective influences are filtered through hindsight and modern perception, and thus can become politicized and can hinder a faithful representation of the past. As Marc Raeff wrote: "Yet the fact of the matter is that all Russian intellectual history was intensely political, and so was its historiography. Its historiography became part and parcel of its history, shaping it as well as being shaped by it."[21] And yet, even though historians are aware of this danger, or admittedly generally because of it, they fear to tread in the grey area of the subjective forces in history and perhaps their interpretation of the past is the worse for it. A clinical approach to history is desirable but it cannot be forgotten that the passions of mankind rule history and therefore these passions must not be avoided for their messy qualities. Belinsky is an example of humanist genius packaged in uncontrolled passion and verbosity, but for many historians his enthusiasm implies a loss of discretion and judgement and thereby his credibility has been undermined. Since a reserved and clinical demeanour is preferable of history's political theorists, the intelligentsia on the whole are ill appreciated for the purity of their ideas and their strength of conviction, and sadly, the role of their idealism in shaping one of the most monumental revolutions in history has been skirted around, hinted at, assumed, but never genuinely tackled on the scale of its importance.

In order to understand Belinsky and Herzen's idealism, this work relied mainly on their writings written in anthologies and collected translations. In regards to Belinsky, the collection of his writings, *Selected Philosophical Works*, published in Moscow, includes nearly all his important reviews and letters, and to date this is the only complete collection of his works in English. Belinsky's highly important *Letter to Gogol*, however, is available in nearly every translated anthology on Russian intellectual history. The standard Soviet edition of Belinsky's writings is his *Complete Collected Works* (*Polnoe*

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[20] See Acton, *Rethinking the Russian Revolution*, pp. 84-85, for his views on subjective and objective roles of historical figures.

[21] Marc Raeff. "*Analyzing the Realm of a Russian Utopia*," Canadian-American Slavic Studies 1977 11(3): p. 436.

sobranie sochinenii). There are a myriad of secondary studies of Belinsky in Russian, although they generally take an ideological approach attempting to link Belinsky with Marxism (this is most evident in school texts), for example Z.V. Smirnov's *Social-Political and Philosophical Views of V.G. Belinskii* (*Obshchestvenno-politicheskie i folosofskie vzgliady V.G. Belinskogo*). The three major secondary sources consulted in English were Herbert Bowman's *Vissarion Belinsky (1811-18148); a Study in the Origins of Social Criticism in Russia*, Evgenii Lampert's *Studies in Rebellion*, and Francis Randall's *Vissarion Belinsky*. The first of these was published in 1954 and for nearly two decades served as the only full-length monograph on Belinsky available in English. Bowman takes a sympathetic liberal view of Belinsky, focusing largely on his intellectual development, and he includes many important translated passages of Belinsky's work. Lampert portrays Belinsky as suffering against his own idealism, perhaps unavoidably, since his humane spirit was at odds with the measures he advocated. Randall takes a valuable approach by examining in turn each of Belinsky's major works, and offers a fascinating interpretation of his atheism as a belief in ethics rather than religion. Victor Terras has also produced a work, *Belinskij and Russian Literary Criticism: The Heritage of Organic Aesthetics*; however, this book focuses on the influence of Belinsky's literary criticism on the course of Russian literature and the Socialist Realism of later decades, an important topic to be sure, but one that this thesis discusses only briefly. Belinsky is examined in many general works on the Russian intelligentsia and is widely regarded as a progenitor of Russian socialism although as one who died before he could make a concrete contribution. While his idealism has been discussed, mostly in regards to his literary criticism, its effect on the authoritarian nature of communism has not been considered. There is much research to be done on Belinsky outside the parameters of this thesis, as he appears to have been largely neglected in Western circles and generally misinterpreted in the Soviet era.[22]

In regards to Herzen, source materials are abundant for he is widely known as the father of Russian socialism and as an extremely important contributor to revolutionary thought, due to his *Free Russian Press* (*Volnaya russkaya tipografya*) in London. Absolutely invaluable to any study of Herzen is his autobiography, *My Past and Thoughts* (*Byloe I Dumy*), a masterful account of the nineteenth century that provides revealing

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[22] Richard Freeborn has a work to be published in 2003 by the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London, to be titled "Furious Vissarion: Belinsky's Struggle for Literature, Love and Ideas."

insights into not only Herzen's thoughts and feelings but into the lives of the intelligentsia in general. His other major works are all easily available and necessary to the study of his thought, including *Letters from France and Italy*, *From the Other Shore*, *The Russian People and Socialism* (*Le people russe et le socialisme, Lettres a M. Jules Michelet*), *Ends and Beginnings*, not to mention an early novel *Who is to Blame?* (*Kto vinovat?*). As with Belinsky, a complete edition of Herzen's works in English translation is available, *Selected Philosophical Works*, published in Moscow. The standard Russian edition is titled *Collected Works* (*Sobranie sochinenii*) and contains the second half of Herzen's memoirs. The best study of Herzen, and one of the great works of Russian socialist thought, is Martin Malia's *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism*. While Malia has written many works on the intelligentsia with insight and appreciation, this biography remains the classic text on Herzen's intellectual development and influence. Edward Acton has also written a brief overview of Herzen's career, *Alexander Herzen and the Role of the Intellectual Revolutionary*, and another more recent work by Judith Zimmerman, *Midpassage: Alexander Herzen and European Revolution*, describes his experience as an émigré and how he came to possess such influence in Russia while living abroad. In 1993, Monica Partridge compiled a collection of essays, unique in their diverse perspectives, entitled: *Alexander Herzen: Collected Studies*. In regards to secondary sources, however, the three major historians consulted were Adam Ulam, particularly *Prophets and Conspirators in Pre-revolutionary Russia*; Evgenii Lampert's *Studies in Rebellion* and *Sons Against Fathers: Studies in Russian Radicalism and Revolution*, and Franco Venturi's massive undertaking *Roots of the Revolution*. Although Herzen has been studied a great deal, his remarkable perspectives on liberty have yet to be truly embraced, with the exception of Isaiah Berlin and his essays on Herzen in *Russian Thinkers*. Nowhere has Herzen been so appreciated for his political thought as in the works of Isaiah Berlin, who truly seemed to understand the astonishing liberal spirit behind this Russian socialist. Aileen Kelly, a student of Berlin, has come nearest with a recent collection of essays (1999) on Herzen, Chekhov, and Bakhtin, *Views from the Other Shore*, which links Herzen's views on freedom to such Western humanists and scientists as Francis Bacon, Schiller, Proudhon, J. S. Mill, and Darwin. This book has inspired a renewed interest in Herzen as a unique political thinker opposed to absolutes and ideological certainties, a work definitely in keeping with this thesis and the idea that Herzen understood and warned against the consequences of idealism.

Other sources that assisted greatly in composing and analyzing this thesis in regards to the Russian intelligentsia were: Martin Malia's recent work, *Russia Under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum*, James H. Billington's classic work, *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture*, and although they were written decades ago, Nicolas Berdyaev's *The Origin of Russian Communism* and *The Russian Idea*, which granted insight into Russia's historical obsession with idealism.

When historians do dare to tread in examining the ideals of the intelligentsia, and this is the case for all the schools of historiography, the intelligentsia are generally criticized for their idealism on the basis of naivety and passion, rather than on a sound examination of the limitations and fallacies of conflicting ideals and the effects of overarching devotion. Aileen Kelly writes that Western historians often treat the intelligentsia with condescension and revulsion because their theories were borrowed, misunderstood, taken to extremes, and ultimately failed to bring freedom to the Russian people.[23] Isaiah Berlin insisted, however, that this should not prevent a thoughtful and sincere account of the social and moral questions raised by the intelligentsia, and of the problems they sought to resolve.[24] The most compelling histories assess the intelligentsia on the weight of their humanistic spirit, rather than judging them by deficiencies in their thought. Generally speaking, Russian socialism is judged unfairly in light of historical hindsight; the demise of the Soviet experiment suggests that the theories were lacking and therefore the intelligentsia, as a group, are treated as a historical oddity producing inelegant and cumbersome solutions to their social and political condition. It is the intent of this thesis not to judge Belinsky and Herzen for their ideals but to examine the ideals themselves for compatibility in organizing a socialist society, and for engendering an atmosphere of hope and expectation of not only a better life but also the ultimate life, one which might eventually eradicate evil itself. Instead of ridiculing the naivety of a vision that truly should be held in the back of our minds as an eventual goal for mankind (though undoubtedly a long ways into the future), it would be better to examine the crucial force of idealism in shaping our world. If ideals as noble as those of Belinsky and Herzen could devolve into the Stalinism of the 1930s, then perhaps idealism should not be ridiculed but rather held in awe as a force capable of substantial change and not always

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[23] Aileen Kelly in Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, p. xiii.
[24] Berlin. *"Russian Thought and the Slavophile Controversy,"* p. 573.

for the better despite original intent. By examining the life and works of Belinsky and Herzen, it becomes apparent that idealism leads to the development of ultimate solutions for mankind that can only result in an authoritarian regime of some kind. The goals of this thesis then are to present early idealism in its most innocent stages, to contrast the noble hopes of Belinsky and Herzen with the well-known outcome of communist history, and to pinpoint the dangers of idealism by paying heed to how easily ideals can be led astray through unyielding devotion.

II) Vissarion Belinsky 1811-1848

The idealism that eventually contributed to twentieth-century communism was rooted in the life and works of Vissarion Belinsky. One need only understand the thoughts and feelings of Belinsky to understand why Russia was propelled into a socialist revolution. And further to this, one need only to recognize the force of conviction that Belinsky inspired to recognize that same conviction underlying the harshest aspects of communist life. At its heart, communism was based on the expectation of a better life and this man, perhaps more passionately than any other, engendered that expectation by triggering guilt for human suffering and by demanding a radical revolution in human relations. Belinsky's idealism was the catalyst for a breakdown of conscience among the Russian intelligentsia, a breakdown that would thrust the intellectuals headlong into socialist theory as the only recourse for Russia's crimes. Through his social criticism, Belinsky confronted the public with slavery, poverty, and every humiliation in Russian life, demanding true accountability for the people's misery. His readers were made to feel that it was their responsibility to alter Russia's course and to deliver the Russian people to the best life possible. The original impetus towards socialism began with Belinsky, as his ideals dictated a moral political solution, utopian in scope and spiritual in foundation, and his unyielding devotion demanded the strictest obedience to this course of action. In effect, Belinsky was willing to overturn every social and political construct in order for his vision to succeed. However, Belinsky's idealism was 'blind.' He did not recognize the despotism latent in his prescriptions for revolution and at times even directly advocated force, either out of despair regarding the truth of man's inability to effect change without violence, or a naïve hope that the reins of power would be released once revolution was achieved, for at heart Belinsky was no despot despite his passionate proclamations for change. Unfortunately for the Russian people, his sincerity of purpose blinded him to the consequences of unchecked idealism. Belinsky's commitment to humanity was relentless and his successors would later translate this stubbornness into a negation of all that he had hoped for. It is important to examine Belinsky's life and works for we find Russia's fractured conscience and the role of idealism on the path to socialism, revolution, and an authoritarian state. It is Belinsky who demonstrates the lure of ideology, triggering powerful idealistic hopes and unscrupulous devotion to a noble vision that would require a great act of collective free will in order to succeed, or would otherwise descend into a dictatorship of the well-intentioned but ruthless few.

In order to understand the idealism that drove the revolutionaries forward and later spawned a dictatorship, it is necessary to understand Belinsky for his earnest devotion to human liberty is where the path to authoritarianism begins. Both Soviet and Western historians have underestimated his worth, regarding him as overly emotional, as a commentator rather than a theoretician, with too much passion and not enough reason. Belinsky has been overlooked as a man who died before he had a chance to develop socialist theories or make a concrete contribution to Russian intellectual thought, decidedly too soon to have a significant effect on the movement leading to 1917. The effect of his idealism on the revolutionary intelligentsia has not been seriously considered. But if idealism led to absolute conviction and thus to the path of an authoritarian revolutionary movement, it began most strongly with Belinsky. His life, his philosophical development, and his literary career, particularly the final testament of his beliefs, his *Letter to Gogol*, must be examined if the strength of purpose that overtook idealism on the path to Utopia is to be discerned. The man epitomizes careless idealism, for he believes so strongly in liberty that he does not care how it comes to pass, a dangerous position to hold and one which contrasts greatly with Herzen, and therefore Belinsky must be understood as a human being complete in his development. But although Belinsky is the vehicle, the true focus of this chapter is his idealism, and its absolute, unforgiving, and contradictory nature on a path to authoritarian rule. It is his hopes and determination that inspired the relentless force of the revolutionary intelligentsia and later the Bolsheviks; his idealism produced their goals but also their unscrupulous and dictatorial methods. Belinsky is the source of a catalytic idealistic force that took hold of Russia and did not let go until very recently with the fall of the Soviet Union. He drove Russia to embrace ideals in their absolute form (for socialist theory is based on *perfect* equality for *every single person*) and to enforce these ideals in the strictest of terms thereby denying the very liberty that was sought. It would at first appear a contradiction to advocate liberty through a gulag prison system, but that is the tragic end result of an earlier hope, too precious and important to be postponed, altered, or deviated from. As Solzhenitsyn wrote, ideology lent evildoing its justification and because of ideology, the twentieth century experienced evil on a scale calculated in the deaths of millions.[20] Through Belinsky, we can understand how the best in human intentions can

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[20] Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn. The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation. Trans. Thomas P. Whitney. (Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973), p. 174.

result in the worst in human action, how tolerance and compromise are discarded in the face of absolute truth, and how complete devotion to an ideal can foster a dictatorial character.

This chapter will attempt to bring out only those aspects of Belinsky's life that speaks to the development of his ideals and his determination, but it is also necessary to reflect on his importance in Russian society in order to gauge the effect on his peers. Although Belinsky did not come by socialism until late in his life, his points of view and his attempts to speak the truth in Tsarist Russia, and to impose that standard on other Russian writers, played a large role in the development of socialist aspirations at large. Through his role in Russian society, Belinsky forced upon his readers a commitment to reality that made them feel personally responsible for their fellow man. It was no longer left to God or the Tsar, but to man himself to alter human relations, and this was the starting point for Russia's idealistic journey towards a socialist dictatorship. The importance of the cause demanded an unyielding dedication and an accompanying impatience to see the future implemented. This chapter is thus divided into five sections regarding Belinsky's contribution to the authoritarian character of Russian socialism.

The first section, *An Idealist in the Making*, provides an overview of Belinsky's life and character. It is necessary to know the circumstances of his life in order to frame his idealism and its significance. Quite simply, we must know whom Belinsky was before we can know the effect of his idealism, and how it was born and shaped to include the use of force in installing liberty. *The Philosophical Development of Idealism* follows, a section on Belinsky's intellectual path, including the development of his socialist beliefs. This journey is included because, despite a steadfast dedication to his fellow man, Belinsky did not immediately embrace socialism and nor was he entirely consistent in his outlook. As Herbert Bowman wrote, "The entire philosophic development of an age, from the idealism of the 1830s to the socialism of the 1840s is worked out in the battle of his personal development."[21] Thus Belinsky's journey towards socialism reveals why Russia chose this utopian path and how it came to be dictatorial through unchecked devotion. The next two sections concern Belinsky's social criticism and his own writings including most particularly the *Letter to Gogol*, his final and most famous work. The sections are entitled respectively *The Publicity of Idealism: Belinsky's Social Criticism*,

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[21] Herbert E. Bowman. Vissarion Belinski, 1811-1848: A Study in the Origins of Social Criticism in Russia (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1954), p. 12.

and *Testament of Idealism: The Letter to Gogol*. These sections are important in relaying the influence that Belinsky had on his contemporaries and on the transmission of fervent idealism to his successors. In an era of censorship, Belinsky criticized Russian society by criticizing Russian literature, and thereby promoted an ideal future by promoting absolute truth and responsibility. And if there were ever any doubt to the ideals he could only hint at in the public press, his 'private' *Letter to Gogol* uncovered the force of conviction that the nation would eventually submit to. The final section, *The Role of Idealism in Shaping Authoritarianism in Russian Socialism: Vissarion Belinsky*, reflects on how Belinsky's idealism, evident in the preceding sections by his life and works, affected the revolutionary movement on the path to an authoritarian government. This concluding section sums up Belinsky's influence on shaping the outcome of socialism in Russia as well as summing up the brunt of this thesis in regards to Belinsky, that idealism is a seemingly innocent force capable of betraying itself. Although Herzen recognized the danger, Belinsky did not understand that, once held too dearly, the purest desires for mankind could have unintended and even tragic consequences since idealists do not respect the free will of others. Once Belinsky can be understood, then Russia can also be understood for the mistake of using force on the path to utopia.

A) An Idealist in the Making:

Belinsky earned himself the nickname "Furious Vissarion" (*Neistovyj Vissarion*) as he was furious in his idealism, completely giving himself up to the consequences of ideology, never shrinking from implications or contradictions, or from later admitting defeat when faced with obstacles. This aspect of severe dedication to a noble cause would pass on to his revolutionary successors, immortalized by Chernyshevsky's literary character Rakhmetov in the novel *What is to Be Done?* that later became an inspiration for Lenin. Throughout his life, Belinsky's hatred of oppression and falsehood was ceaseless and his defence of the human personality extended beyond religious dogma to true compassion for his fellow man. This compassion was revolutionary in nature because it demanded a social revolution concerned not with changing the outer façade of government, which to Belinsky meant trading in one form of despotism for another, but in changing the way society operated on a basic and personal level. He had a gift for perceiving injustice even when hidden under the weight of tradition and historical

circumstance.[22] He recognized the absurdity and hypocrisy of official existence in nineteenth century Russia and took every opportunity to expose moral pretexts and abuses of authority that led to the dehumanization of mankind. His ferociousness in regards to truth did not leave room for interpretation, deviation, or dissent. As an idealist surrounded by misery, he held an image of a perfect world and anything but this image was a betrayal to mankind, a throwback to the past when Russia put her faith in Church and State to ameliorate existence. However, according to Belinsky, Church and State were not founded on true ideals but on muted variations, and thus a muted morality resided in Russia and it permitted abuses to take place in the guise of morality. Even capitalism and democracy were based on a diluted sense of ethics. Only socialism held promise as a political system but at this early stage in history it would have to be implemented with unyielding force. Belinsky's strength of conviction is best portrayed by Herzen in his memoirs *My Past and Thoughts*:

> But in that shy man, that frail body, there dwelt a mighty spirit, the spirit of a gladiator! Yes, he was a powerful fighter! He could not preach or lecture; what he needed was a quarrel. If he met with no objection, if he was not stirred to irritation, he did not speak well, but when he felt stung, when his cherished convictions were called in question, when the muscles of his cheeks began to quiver and his voice to burst out, then he was worth seeing; he pounced upon his opponent like a panther, he tore him to pieces, made him a ridiculous, a piteous object, and incidentally developed his own thought, with unusual power and poetry. The dispute would often end in blood, which flowed from the sick man's throat; pale, gasping, with his eyes fixed on the man with whom he was speaking, he would lift his handkerchief to his mouth with shaking hand and stop, deeply mortified, crushed by his physical weakness. How I loved and how I pitied him at those moments![23]

Belinsky's personal character and his fervent quest for liberty were shaped by an impoverished upbringing and maligned health; he understood poverty and suffering because he was born into it, and his idealistic outlook was framed by tribulation and bitterness towards his own oppression. As Francis Randall notes, he appreciated the cruel truthfulness of Gogol, the Russian writer he championed most, because Belinsky directly

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[22] Turgenev, who dedicated his novel *Fathers and Sons* to Belinsky, said of him: "He instantly recognized the beautiful and the ugly, the true and the false, and with fearlessness he pronounced judgment, pronounced it outspokenly, without reservation, warmly and powerfully, with all the drive and assurance of conviction." Francis B. Randall. Vissarion Belinskii (Newtonville: Oriental Research Partners, 1987), p. 25.

[23] Alexander Herzen. My Past and Thoughts: The Memoirs of Alexander Herzen. Trans. Constance Garnett. (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1973), pp. 241-42. The blood in this description is a reference to Belinsky's battle with consumption that haunted him much of his life.

experienced the life of Russian provincialism.[24] He was raised in a small town, later renamed 'Belinsky' on the centenary of his death, in the family of a poor country doctor. His upbringing was rough, a product of ignorant and savage surroundings, and this period of poverty and inanity triggered a lifelong appreciation for adversity that urged him to develop his abilities in man's defence. He realized early in life that suffering was based on man's inability or unwillingness to alter his own surroundings, and this belief would prove instrumental in inspiring the intelligentsia to salvage Russia from her history and create a bold future of its own making. 'God helps those who helps themselves' seems to have been a guiding focal point for one so untrained in the political arena as Belinsky, for he was self-taught, acquiring knowledge through friends and self study in pursuit of answers to weighty questions about the nature of life. In this respect, he both suffered and gained, for his idealism took its own course free from interference and yet a sound academic grounding may have tempered it with logic and reason. Whereas his friends may have scoffed at the idea of changing the world, Belinsky did not doubt that the utopian ideologies he studied were not only viable, but should be implemented immediately. A stark sense of right and wrong and an aching conscience drove Belinsky to avidly believe that the socialist cause was well worth the cost of a 'small' amount of human suffering; it was not unconscionable that some should suffer now so that future generations would have untold liberty and equality, the two guiding ideals of Russian socialism that, although in reality were mutually exclusive, were both theoretically essential to the system. Russian socialism was unique in this sense that, unlike Marxism and communism, personal liberty was viewed as a requirement for attaining social equality.

In 1829, Belinsky entered the University of Moscow, but was expelled three years later on the grounds of unsound health and limited abilities. He suffered from a lifelong battle with consumption but his expulsion was partly on account of a play that he naively submitted to the censors. *Dmitry Kalinin* was a thinly-veiled protest against serfdom, complete with the pledge that he would not rest as long as a single human being was in misery: "Can it really be true that eternal bliss must necessarily be bought at the price of the most frightful sufferings? It comes rather expensive!"[25] Belinsky's compassion for man and feelings against official religion were evident at this early stage

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[24] Randall, p. 11.

[25] E. Lampert. Studies in Rebellion (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1957), pp. 47-48. Belinsky's quote from *Dmitry Kalinin*, p. 61.

but even then he was blind to the consequences of his idealism for only someone terribly brave or foolish would submit such an openly subversive work to the university. However, despite a lack of formal training, or perhaps because of it, Belinsky displayed a natural talent for understanding and advertising the human condition, along with an astonishing intellectual capacity. After expulsion from the university, Belinsky was adopted into Nicholas Stankevich's circle, a pivotal experience that provided a valuable sounding board for his ideas and that determined the direction of his life thereafter as a member of the intelligentsia. The Stankevich circle, and other literary groups of the 1830s and 1840s, was characterized by informal discussion about philosophical and political ideas impossible to express in the public arena. Since Belinsky was weak in languages (only passable French and very little German), men such as Alexander Herzen and Mikhail Bakunin were his sources for German Romantic and French Socialist thought.[26] However, Belinsky's instinctive understanding of the human condition infused new meaning into these otherwise recycled philosophical theories, as to every new intellectual discovery he added his own righteous outrage toward human misery. This element of outrage and indignity added a new moral quality to the intelligentsia, a morality that could not condone anything less than an ideal future. Into the mix of weighty and tired German and French ideology entered a youthful idealism and enthusiasm that expected much more from theory than speculation, but concrete action towards a promised goal. Idle discussion is seldom satisfactory to an idealist, who does not care for the obstacles in his path or for wasting time in deciding how to remove them, the plight of humanity is too dire, and the possibilities for change are too promising. And Belinsky equally expected each new ideology to bring about Russia's salvation *tout de suite* without question or reservation and without any doubt as to a glorious future, and it was very important that it would come to pass, for millions of Russian peasants depended upon it, living in abject poverty and ignorance.

In the spring of 1833, Belinsky began a journalist career in Moscow at one of the thick journals, *Telescope* (*Teleskop*), and its literary supplement *Common Talk* (*Molva*), under the editorship of Nicholas Nadezhdin. Both Nadezhdin and Belinsky were *raznochintsy*, of various ranks outside the gentry, a rising demographic among Russian intellectuals at that time and reflective of changing ambitions away from the idle speculation of the upper classes towards an urgency of action from those people who

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[26] Randall, pp. 33-34.

desperately needed a revolution. After the *Telescope* was closed in 1836 for publishing Peter Chaadaev's notorious *Philosophical Letter*, a tirade against Russia's backwardness and professed absence of national merit, Belinsky went on to a brief editorship at the *Moscow Observer* (*Moskovskii Nablyudatel'*).[27] In 1839, he was lured from Moscow to St. Petersburg to write for the *Annals of the Fatherland* (*Otechestvenniye Zapiski*), and it was there that he exerted his greatest influence turning literary criticism into subversive discussions about political issues, affecting the course of literary realism for almost the next century.

> Belinsky's articles were awaited with feverish expectation by the young people in Moscow and Petersburg from the 25th of every month. Half a dozen times the students would call in at the coffee-houses to ask whether *Notes of the Fatherland* had been received; the heavy volume was snatched from hand to hand. 'Is there an article by Belinsky?' 'Yes,' and it was devoured with feverish interest, with argument... and three or four cherished convictions and reputations were no more.[28]

The last one and a half years of Belinsky's life were spent at *The Contemporary* (*Sovremennik*), which later become the major literary vehicle of the late 1850s and 1860s under the guidance of Nicholas Chernyshevsky and Nicholas Dobrolyubov, the next generation of radical thinkers. Belinsky's major works, during the course of his journalistic career, included *Literary Musings* (*Literaturnye Mechtanye*, 1834), a survey of Russian literature from Lomonosov to Zhukovsky and a lament on the lack of an authentic national voice; eleven articles on Pushkin (*Stati o Pushkine*, 1843-44), which cast him as a literary giant; and two annuals reviews of literature: *A View of Russian Literature in 1846* and *A View of Russian Literature in 1847* that elevated the careers of writers such as Gogol and Dostoyevsky. Belinsky's deep love of literature and his natural empathy for suffering enabled him to perceive almost immediately a literary work's function and importance in the context of Russian life, whether it served Russia's slavery

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[27] Chaadaev had been declared insane and put under house arrest for protesting his nation's failings, and Belinsky abhorred the hypocrisy of his treatment, that Russia should be so mortified by a literary spotlight on its crimes, punishing the author and turning a blind eye to the truth of his words: "We are strangely sensitive: men are flogged and we don't resent it, sent to Siberia and we don't resent it; but here Chaadaev, you see, has rubbed the people's honour the wrong way: we mustn't dare to talk; to speak is insolence – a flunkey must never speak!" Belinsky in Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1973), pp. 243-244.

[28] Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, p. 240.

or freedom.[29] His readers became adept at deciphering the meaning behind the words expressed, judging not the prose but the state of Russia itself, and eventually writers were able to use this tool of literary deception to publish works with significance beyond entertainment value; works that commented on moral and political subjects.

Belinsky was always very poor and, like other members of the *raznochintsy*, he wrote to earn a living for his family, and he produced a steady stream of reviews and articles upon almost every literary work in appearance. His consumption was aggravated by overwork and no doubt from the ferocity of his mental activity and Belinsky died very young in St. Petersburg in June 1848, just short of his 37th birthday. He was still alive to greet revolution in Europe and "he died taking its glow for the flush of the rising dawn!"[30] His last great effort was his *Letter to Gogol*, a final testament to his beliefs and one of the most important letters in Russian history for its idealism and pure rage against oppression. In sum total, Belinsky's life as an idealist was spent in rage and frustration for the seemingly endless obstacles to freedom. He devoted his personal and professional life to convincing others that a revolution in human behaviour was needed to create an ideal world, and with ideals as noble and lofty as his, the matter of 'persuasion' was vital and not without a grain of authoritarianism. Despite a brief period in the early 1840s in which, under the influence of Hegel, Belinsky experienced an intellectual crisis, he was a consistent advocate for truth and humanity but his love for mankind was peppered with disdain for man's inability to help himself. That men should be forcibly led to happiness thus entered the vocabulary of the intelligentsia.

B) The Philosophical Development of Idealism:

Belinsky's philosophical development parallels Russia's movement towards communism: a journey through idealism towards socialism, but due to the severe sense of urgency and determination, on the path to authoritarianism. This evolution, from a belief in true freedom to advocating a singular vision imposed by force, first revolved around discovering fundamental answers in Western philosophy regarding human existence. Belinsky's conscience demanded that he examine the inhumane world around him and find justification for evil, greed, humiliation, insincerity, and every negative impulse that

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[29] Turgenev wrote that no other critic of the day was on par with Belinsky "because he surpassed them all without exception in the power and sensitivity of his aesthetic perception, in his almost infallible taste." Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 101.

[30] Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, p. 245.

drove Russia into spiritual darkness.[31] Like other *raznochintsy*, he wanted to know the truth of existence in nineteenth century Russia and to change it, and he searched for answers in the great philosophical systems of German Romantic writers and philosophers such as Schiller and Hegel, and French Socialists such as Proudhon and Saint-Simon. It is often said that Belinsky proved his earnestness in this manner, through vacillation between theoretical systems, preferring to discover truth than to cling to cherished beliefs, but despite the outward appearance of intellectual crises, he was a consistent advocate for personal happiness.[32] Unlike other members of the intelligentsia, men such as Herzen who explored philosophy to atone for the guilt of a pampered existence, Belinsky's search for meaning, as brother to the underprivileged, had a resounding sense of urgency. His underlying attitude was the same throughout his life, a deep and pressing concern for mankind that would not condone concessions or half-hearted measures. Representative democracy or capitalism for the wealthy had little meaning to peasants engaged in basic survival. The Russian people required an all-encompassing revolution in human relations that would change the very way people related to one another towards an existence based on brotherhood and decency. Belinsky was too idealistic for anything less than perfect human liberty and equality. However, he did not suspect that his prescription for Russia, although noble, was in itself dictatorial, and should dedication to a singular solution permit the use of force, liberty would be abrogated before it had a chance to begin.

Many historians distinguish three phases in Belinsky's intellectual development: his early years of influence under the German Romantic writers and philosophers, his brief 'reconciliation period' with Hegel, and his final years under the left Hegelians and French Socialists.[33] Belinsky's thought was never so neatly packaged as these stages suggest, but it is helpful to conceive his development along these lines for the purposes of chronological tidiness.[34] By Belinsky's own admission, written shortly before his death: "God was my first thought, mankind – my second, man – my third and last one".[35] In actuality, this statement best summarizes the phases of his philosophical development, as the culmination of his thought, after much agonizing, lay finally in the individual human

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[31] Likewise Russia, as a nation, experienced an identity crisis in regards to the West that amounted to a great deal of national soul-searching.

[32] Bowman, p. 14.

[33] Soviet authors emphasize only two phases: a pre-socialist, idealist phase, and a "revolutionary-democratic" materialist phase. Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 60.

[34] Randall, p. 41.

[35] Belinsky in Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 60.

person. Although socialism is generally associated in the Western mind with the group or the collective, in fact, at its core, Russian socialism is most concerned with the individual for at its basis is the theory that no one person should have more or less than any other and hence every single person could be happy. Whereas, in the West, we have come to equate communism with a loss of personal identity, Russian socialism was meant ideally to produce the greatest amount of personal freedom, an issue addressed further in the next chapter on Alexander Herzen. Belinsky's overriding concern with the common man, the individual person, reflects perfectly this socialist idealism that despite an inherent contradiction between ideals, such as true liberty and equality in a world of selfish interests, a perfect society could exist. Is it possible for everyone to be absolutely free and equal at all times without disturbing the rights of others? Belinsky believed it had to be possible, for how could mankind justify happiness for only the select few, when faith in heavenly compensation had failed? In other words, having dismissed the notion of a heavenly afterlife as a false reward for earthly compliance, it must be possible to find utopia in this life, otherwise existence would serve no purpose and suffering would find no resolution.

Little attention is devoted in this thesis to the first of the three phases of Belinsky's philosophical development except to note that the German Romantic writers and philosophers affected his social criticism and ideas regarding a writer's social purpose and moral duty, explored further in the next section: *The Publicity of Idealism: Belinsky's Social Criticism.* His second phase is known as the "reconciliation with reality," as he made an earnest and disastrous attempt to rationalize the world around him, to account for misery, through the complex philosophy of Hegel. This brief phase in Belinsky's intellectual development is important to note because for a short period (1839-1841), he resolutely defended the Tsarist autocratic regime, and his writing from this period was later used by the Soviets to promote obedience. Belinsky's experiences with Hegel also reflect on the intelligentsia's overall obsession with this Western thinker as some of the most important issues of Russian intellectual thought were debated through the prism of Hegel. Herzen considered Hegel's philosophy "the algebra of revolution; it emancipates man in an unusual way and leaves not one stone upon another of the Christian world, of the world of tradition that has outlived itself."[36] Hegel's theoretical system was all-encompassing, claiming to account for all the problems of philosophy and

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[36] Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, p. 237.

history, and its seductive power lay in this claim, for the Russian intelligentsia, and especially Belinsky, looked to philosophy not as Western thinkers do, with breezy relativity and scepticism, but rather with wholehearted sincerity and utter acceptance.[37] It was very important to men like Belinsky that ideology succeed in its claims, for the condition of their lives depended on it. Hegel's system was the synthesis of German Romantic thought, developing idealism and theories of historical change even further to include a logical course of action, a roadmap to reality in the dialectical method. According to this method, the spirit of the world continually recreates itself in a struggle to realize its true nature and, therefore, history moves along a discernible path towards its highest form, which Hegel considered at that moment to be the State. In order to find true freedom, it was necessary to fuse human will with that of the World-Spirit, in this case, to obey the laws of the State.[38] The implications of Hegel's theoretical system proved a double-edged sword, serving the aims of both conservatives and radicals. On the one hand, the dialectical method encouraged change and revolution as a means of implementing the next stage of history on the path to the highest good, and this interpretation was considered a 'leftist' approach for encouraging destruction of the old in favour of the new. On the other hand, in order to accept that reality behaves according to the dialectical method, one must also accept that "development has been a rational process; ...it represents the rational and necessary course of the World-Spirit."[39] In Belinsky's case, this acceptance of reality was extended to its fiercest conclusion, whereby this great humanist forced himself to accept despotism as rational simply because it was real.

Belinsky's previous attempts to manipulate reality through the spectrum of German Romanticism ultimately left him feeling isolated from positive action, for it was not enough to advertise suffering but to actively work towards an ideal future. Added to this, Belinsky could not account for why human suffering existed in the first place, for all the uneven excesses and deficiencies of Russian existence. As Herbert Bowman wrote, Belinsky could not justify reality since reality itself was unsatisfactory, and so he

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[37] The intellectual vacuum that presided in a nation without a Renaissance or Reformation in its history, and besieged by censorship and illiteracy, dictated complete abandonment to fresh ideas.

[38] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. "Reason in History", Classics of Western Thought: The Modern World (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 4th Edition, 1988), pp. 338-339.

[39] Hegel, "Reason in History", pp. 340-341.
Randall, p. 40.

attempted to make Russian life (and autocracy) acceptable through Hegelian rationalization.[40] This phase caused Belinsky untold misery, as well as the loss of his closest friends, who were bewildered and outraged to hear of his conversion to tsarist sympathizing: "Do you know that from your point of view," asked Herzen, "you can prove that the monstrous tyranny under which we live is rational and ought to exist?" "There is no doubt about it," Belinsky answered.[41] His panegyrics to the monarchy branded Belinsky a reactionary, as he could not see how absurd it was to defend the oppressor in the fight for the oppressed. He instead wallowed in the comforting delusion that there was a reason for people's suffering at that moment in history and that inevitably the situation would correct itself as humanity moved on to the next stage. Indeed, this was a miserable state for an idealist and one that could not last long. It may have been that this interpretation of Hegel provided Belinsky with a respite from bearing the knowledge that the suffering surrounding him had no purpose, no consequences, and no end in sight. Randall also points to his worsening health and poverty towards the end of the 1830s and a feeling of rising despair that may have contributed to his state of mind.[42] "I look at reality," he wrote in a letter to Bakunin, "which I used to despise so much, and feel strangely stirred by a sense of its rightness; I realize that nothing can be banished from it, that nothing can be imprecated and rejected."[43] Belinsky was willing to go far for the sake of truth, as he gave up his friends and suppressed his own ideals in order to seek it. He could not last long in this conflicted state, however, and he came to realize that the misery of the masses could not be explained away or sacrificed on the altar of "dialectical necessity." Belinsky's desperate need to change historical circumstances had caused him to accept, for a moment (as his intellectual successors later did), that despotism was part of a plan and therefore needed to exist. But upon awakening from this delusion, Belinsky developed his greatest contribution to intellectual thought, by revolting against Hegel and the impersonal forces of history in defence of individual man and free will and this had great implications for the revolutionary movement, placing Russia on the path to socialism through idealism, but also on a path to authoritarianism through the fervent devotion which idealism invariably brings.[44] Herzen wrote,

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[40] Bowman, pp. 203-204.
[41] Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, p. 236.
[42] Randall, p. 40.
[43] Belinsky in Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 71.
[44] Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 75.

> Belinsky by no means abandoned Hegel's philosophy when he renounced his one-sided interpretation of it. Quite the contrary, it is from this point that there begins his living, apt, original, combination of philosophical with revolutionary ideas. I regard Belinsky as one of the most remarkable figures of the period of Nicholas.[45]

After 1841, Belinsky entered the third phase of his philosophical development and began to attack the regime through the Left Hegelians and French Socialists. The following quotation reveals Belinsky's movement away from accepting Russian life towards the conviction that acceptance was treasonous to humanity.

> I have special reason to harbour a grudge against Hegel, for I feel that I have been loyal to him in tolerating Russian reality... I will stick to my view: the fate of the subject, an individual, a personality is more important than the fate of the world and the weal of the Chinese emperor... let me inform you, with all respect for your philosophical philistinism, that if I did succeed in reaching the top of the evolution ladder, I would demand even there an account from you of all the victims of the conditions of life and history, of all the victims of accident, superstition, the Inquisition, Philip II, etc., etc.: otherwise I will throw myself headlong from the top rung. I will not have happiness if you gave it to me gratis unless I feel assured about every one of my blood brothers, the bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.[46]

In this passionate proclamation, the fate of individual well-being rises to the forefront, as Belinsky would not tolerate a single sacrificed life in the name of progress and history (and yet, due to the absolute certainty idealism bestows on its adherents, this perspective changes when applied to socialist revolution). He and the intelligentsia gravitated towards socialism as the only guarantee for the rights of the individual and as a social and political solution that would serve all of mankind without a superficial gloss of democratic freedom laid over the upper crust while the masses toiled in obscurity, as was believed the case with Western capitalism. Both Belinsky and Herzen thought Russia could do better in her social evolution than Europe had with democratic-capitalism, and they turned to the French Socialists of the 1840s, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Charles Fourier, Saint-Simon and Louis Blanc. And yet less than a century after Belinsky demanded an account for every victim of history, millions of Russians were purged through prison camps in the name of socialist freedom. Socialist idealism betrayed Russia by inspiring a devotion so unyielding that evil was justified in the name of noble ideals: "and, in the name of something which may never happen, perpetrate crimes today which no one would deny to be monstrous if they were performed for some egoistic

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[45] Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, p. 239.
[46] Belinsky, *Selected Philosophical Works*, pp. 149-150.

purpose, and do not seem so only because they are sanctified by faith in some remote and intangible Utopia."[47] Men acted against their conscience because *devotion*, to an unworkable cause of total equality and liberty, became more important and easier to fulfill than the cause itself. The socialist cause was untenable for a society so young in its political and spiritual development but it was nevertheless adopted with a ferocity that negated free will and thus liberty itself. Quite simply, man could not be liberated by force, for his freedom to choose had already been discarded. Belinsky, and others like him, in their fervent desire to see change did not recognize the peril of force, believing it a necessary evil on the path to a higher good.

There is some debate as to what extent Belinsky could be considered a 'socialist'; his later personal writings are ripe with references to socialism as the "idea of ideas, the alpha and omega of belief and knowledge,"[48] but he did not develop his own socialist theory or reveal a plan for Russia's political development. Belinsky was not an economist and dealt sparingly with concrete details regarding property, an issue not of land but of human beings in Russia during this period.[49] He was deeply opposed to serfdom, but his life ended before he could develop a systematic theory about the implementation or operation of the land question in Russia (that was left for Herzen to struggle with). He did not regard the peasant commune (*obshchina*) with reverence, as did Herzen and the Slavophiles, but rather fought against sentimental notions of Russia's enchanted native institutions.[50] Belinsky's interest in socialism appears to have been ethereal, as he was drawn to its utopian outlook but only scratched the surface of its mechanics, perhaps due to the fact that he stumbled upon socialist theory rather late in his short life. As Belinsky's socialist sympathizing did not amount to any kind of philosophical or practical system, Soviet historians labelled Belinsky a "radical democrat," a precursory figure rather than a socialist himself. Belinsky's efforts on behalf of individual salvation, however, were the first step towards realizing the desire for socialism and, through his promotion of realistic prose, he publicized this want of an ideal life. Belinsky's idealism had a major effect not only on the choice of socialism, as the only system capable of supporting pure ideals, but on the authoritarian tone of this prescription for mankind. The journey which Belinsky took in his philosophical outlook

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[47] Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, pp. 197-199.
[48] Belinsky, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 159.
[49] Randall, p. 42.
[50] Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 83, pp. 91-92.

was the same intellectual journey Russia took as a nation, attempting to account for and ameliorate suffering, valuing ideals of freedom and equality, and devoting heart and soul to these ideals without concession or deviation, and by understanding Belinsky, we understand Russian socialism on a deeper level for its promises and its pitfalls. We understand how a nation could submit itself to a very dark period of forced behaviour, and also get a sense of why that force was deemed necessary on the path to a political and economic system that held much greater possibilities than were ever achieved through the monumental error of force, a product of idealistic faith in a singular solution.

The justification for socialism was heavily rooted in Belinsky's personal outlook and his quest to account for human misery and to atone for Russia's perceived part in abiding that evil.[51] From Belinsky through to Lenin, the Russian intelligentsia is tormented firstly with the question "Who is to Blame?" for inequities and suffering and then inevitably with "What is to be Done?" to create a better world.[52] Like many before and since, Belinsky questioned how a loving God could allow millions to suffer in life and death, selecting so few for salvation, and he demanded that the victims of history be accounted for, most notably in his *Letter to Gogol*. Deficiencies in religious theory were not as troubling to Belinsky as the realization that the name of God was used to justify people's pain, to render it sacrilegious to question suffering, and to dissuade people from realizing that they have the power to change their own lives, without waiting for Judgement Day and compensation in the hereafter.[53] A seemingly self-evident sentiment regarding man's own hand in the state of the nation had revolutionary implications, for it exposed the hypocrisy of man's existence, professing Christian principles of love, while engaging in slavery, corruption, and falsehood. In September 1841, Belinsky cried out in a letter:

> Sociality, sociality – or death! That is my motto. What care I for the existence of the universal when individuality is suffering? What care I if genius on earth lives in heaven when the crowd is wallowing in the dirt? What care I if I conceive the idea, if the world of ideas is open to me in art, religion, and history when I cannot share it with all those who should be my brothers in mankind, my neighbours in Christ, but who are strangers and enemies to me in their ignorance? What is it to me that there is delight for the elect when the majority does not even suspect its

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[51] Berdyaev, *The Origin of Russian Communism*, p. 42.
The Russian Idea, p. 103.

[52] "Who is to Blame?" is the title of Alexander Herzen's novel (1845-1846). "What is to be Done?" is the title of Chernyshevsky's novel (1863) as well as the title of a book by Lenin (1902).

[53] Randall, p. 116.

> possibility? Away then delight if it is given to me alone out of a thousand! I will not have it if I cannot have it in common with my lesser brethren![54]

Belinsky could not justify or rationalize God's existence in the face of immeasurable inequities and misery, and instead adopted what Randall calls the Protestant aspect of modern revolutionaries, a belief in ethics and compassion without the outward trappings of official religion. Belinsky's objections to Orthodoxy were moral rather than intellectual for his devotion to man could not permit the lip service paid to individual salvation by the Church.[55] Suffering was not divinely appointed and was not meant to be meekly accepted, when it was clear that mankind had created its own hell through institutions and conventions which served to satisfy the few rather than the many. Belinsky turned to denial and to the beginnings of nihilism as an attack against society and its values:

> My God is negation! In history my heroes are the destroyers of the old: Luther, Voltaire, the Encyclopaedists, the Terrorists, Byron (Cain) and so on. Sense with me now stands higher than reason... and that is why I prefer the blasphemies of Voltaire to acknowledging the authority of religion, society or anything or anybody![56]

Belinsky's faith left him and socialism became the answer to creating a heaven-like existence, here on earth and in this lifetime, without waiting for salvation from above whether from Church or State. His philosophical development had taken him, as it would with Russia as a nation, on a journey from idealistic hope to a plan of action that need only be implemented with whatever haste and force necessary to fulfill the promise of a better life. Added to this, Belinsky's socialist sympathies were rooted in the history of Russia, as was often noted by Nicolas Berdyaev, for it was no coincidence that Russia first adopted the socialist experiment, she had long predicted a glorious future for herself; as the Third Rome theory demonstrated, Russia was destined to inaugurate a new era of Christian brotherhood.[57]

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[54] Belinsky, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 163

[55] Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 62, 78.
Randall, pp. 115–116.

[56] Belinsky, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 164.
Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 79.

[57] The issue of Russia's innate socialist tendencies and the Third Rome theory are found in the Introduction, pp 3-4, footnote #6. This tendency was also not exclusive to Russia during this period; both Poles and Ukrainians have experienced similar streaks of messianism.

C) The Publicity of Idealism: Belinsky's Social Criticism:

In the fourteen short years of his literary career (1834-1848), Belinsky was truly the "literary dictator" of Russia, advertising his ideals under the nose of the censor and inciting Russia to bring about her own salvation by pushing literature forward towards honest portrayals of life. By demanding an authentic, national literature that dealt truthfully and fearlessly with real issues such as serfdom, Belinsky publicized all that was wrong with Russia and hinted at its cure.[58] The power of truth in a closed environment of government repression and censorship perhaps cannot be fully appreciated in modern times, but to recognize the possibility for change in mid-nineteenth century Russia, however mildly, was to incite creative thinking which could only lead to discontent. Belinsky was a revolutionary, not for overt political actions, but for his pure ethics and agonizing devotion to summoning into existence moral truthfulness: "...by the extreme force and vehemence of his convictions (he) turned purely literary disputes into the beginnings of social and political movements."[59] Belinsky committed himself fully to literary reality as a means of transforming society, and his role as top literary critic in Tsarist Russia compelled others to follow. He gave a voice to the intelligentsia in an era of censorship and he judged authors on their ability to discern social justice and to argue for it in real representations of Russian life. His remarkable influence on Russia's literary output was enough to inspire hope for an ideal life, as his passionate nature commanded that there could be no existence besides a truthful one in service of others. It is important to explore Belinsky's career as a social critic because his writing had a significant effect in shaping the idealism of his contemporaries and thus in shaping the dictatorial nature of the revolution and its communist aftermath.

The German Romantic thinkers, Schiller, Fichte, and especially Schelling, influenced Belinsky's earliest stage of intellectual development and his attitude towards literature as a tool for revolutionizing human relations.[60] He discovered that true artists represent life absolutely as it is, and their creations are both part of and acting upon reality, as the artist shapes society through his power to inform the public of its condition. Belinsky used this idea of a writer's power to transform reality in his literary criticism; it was one of the principles by which he interpreted the early works of Gogol, as capable of altering Russian life simply by truthfully portraying it and by demanding that other

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[58] Randall, pp. 6-7.
[59] Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, p. 173.
[60] Randall, pp. 38-39.

authors do the same. Belinsky could publicize Russia's failings and advertise ideals of true liberty and equality without bumping into the censors, and under his guidance, literature came to be more than a reflection of national life but a powerful force in changing attitudes and an instrument of change. His creation of a literary social conscience served in discerning, not only individual opinion, but also collective attitudes to a given subject and thereby opened the door to mass expression and the beginnings of social movement.[61] Belinsky's role as the most influential literary critic of the day was central to this development in critical mass thinking and contemporary issues came to depend on his philosophical outlook.[62] His affect on the Russian public and their attitudes towards life and revolution was very real as Belinsky almost single-handedly ushered Russian literature into a utilitarian role, serving a practical function as social commentator on the nation's values and institutions. Belinsky drew writers out into a public confessional and served as their priest, administering harsh judgements for lies told on behalf of despotism. Any praise or blame assigned to a character, a motive, a situation in a literary work, was meant rather towards its real-life counterpart, and often towards the author himself.

> What is the art of our times? – A judgement, an analysis of society: consequently, criticism. The thinking element has now merged even with the artistic – and for our times a work of art is lifeless if it depicts life only in order to depict it, without a mighty, subjective urge that springs from the prevailing thought of the epoch, if it is not a cry of suffering, or a dithyramb of rapture, if it is not a question, or an answer to a question.[63]

Belinsky evaluated literature with an eye to its function and relationship to society, leaving aesthetic principles behind in the wake of a work's moral implications, a thesis that has drawn both praise and scorn. His literary critiques elevated the careers of previously unnoticed writers based on the portrayal of complex themes of national life, while banishing others for lacking a political or social edge. He was willing to overlook limited aesthetic appeal if the message was politically important, but by the same logic would disregard elegantly written prose because it lacked, in his opinion, a social purpose.[64] Belinsky's interpretation of authors' works (or even misinterpretation since he

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[61] Monica Partridge. Alexander Herzen: Collected Studies (Nottingham, England: Astra Press, 1993), p. 66.

[62] Bowman, p. 202.

[63] V.G. Belinsky. "A Discourse on Criticism", Complete Works, Russ. ed., 1904, Vol. VII, p. 298.

[64] Randall, p. 42. Belinsky's encouragement sustained the early careers of Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Ivan Turgenev, but he died before witnessing their development into truly great authors.

did not always read their intentions correctly) rested on what he perceived to be worthwhile in an evolving national literature, a concern with the dignity of man that overrode aesthetic value in its importance to Russia's development. In simpler terms, what was being said was more important than how it was said.[65] This is not to say that Belinsky was incapable of appreciating literary talent, only that he expected more from that talent than pretty words and empty tales "in a class with card games and dancing,"[66] he wanted Russia's literature to have meaning and purpose alongside an image of life that was just as complex and engaging as the world around him. The entertainment value of art had no meaning for a man whose every breath was tied to the fate of Russia.

> The times of rhymed rattles have gone, never to return; no value is attached to cheap sensations and sentimentality; what is now demanded instead of either is profound feelings and ideas expressed in artistic form, whether in rhyme or not – that makes no difference. To achieve success in poetry today, talent alone is not enough – one must also be educated in the spirit of the times. The poet can no longer live in a world of dreams; he is already a citizen of the kingdom of reality of his times; all the past must live in him. Society no longer wants him to be an entertainer, but a representative of its spiritual, ideal life; an oracle who can answer the most difficult questions, a physician who discovers in himself, before discovering in others, the common pains and sufferings, and heals them by reproducing them in poetic form.[67]

A View of Russian Literature in 1847 provides an example of Belinsky's preference for truth in Russian literature, for he bitterly attacked his literary opponents for preferring falsity and meaningless amusement to truth. He lashed out at the uninterrupted life of the upper classes who refused to have their comfortable existence disturbed by the truth of the world, who sat in their comfortable armchairs reading books for recreation and were alarmed to find the rest of the world in misery:

> And so, dear kind sybarite, for your peace of mind books too must lie, and the poor must forget their misery, the starving their hunger, and the groans of suffering must be wafted to your ears in musical tones so that your appetite may not be spoiled or your sleep disturbed.[68]

He appealed to man's sense of decency and even to the name of Christ to force readers to decide what was more noble, the delusion of pretty peasants in theatrical costumes or the naked truth of the peasants' real existence "in homespun and bast boots, reeking of cheap

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[65] Ralph E. Matlaw, ed. Belinsky, Chernyshevsky, and Dobrolyubov: Selected Criticism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), p. ix.
Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 106.
[66] Belinsky in Bowman, p. 205.
[67] Belinsky, *Complete Works*, Vol. VII, pp. 82-83.
[68] Belinsky, *Selected Philosophical Works*, pp. 416-417.

brandy, their womenfolk looking for all the world like centaurs, their sex at first glance unguessable (sic) from their clothes; and the haunts of poverty, despair, and vice, which have to be reached through back yard knee-deep in mud."[69] Belinsky's eye for hypocrisy alerted him to society's misuse of morality and he inflicted this truth further onto those readers who had not yet realized that Christ came to the earth for the untouchables rather than the rich and powerful; it was for the downtrodden that he sought revolution and a profound spiritual and social change in the way men behaved towards one another:

> The Redeemer of mankind came into this world for all men… His loving and merciful glance was not offended by the sight of festering sores on a body barely covered by filthy rags. He, the Son of God, loved people with a human love and commiserated their poverty and squalor…[70]

The reading public were privy to Belinsky's thoughts regarding the dignity of man and the humiliation of existence.[71] His personal outlook surfaced in his writing and inspired other authors to leak their bottled feelings into literary creations that hitherto were written without this substance of dissent. Censorship permitted only so much deviation, however, and while the modern-day reader might not catch the stirring beneath the surface, the audience at that time and place was fully adept at tuning in to the undercurrent of social discourse. Truth was the greatest weapon against the censor: "a true portrayal of moral disorder is more powerful than any sallies against it."[72] An author did not need to say outright that serfdom was wrong, just give a truthful depiction of life in the villages and the readers could judge for themselves. As Isaiah Berlin wrote, all books embody ideas and points of view and an attitude to life in literature needs to be judged, as it would be in real life for its degree of truthfulness and its motives.[73] Belinsky wholeheartedly adopted this anxiety towards the written word and expressed his ideals as forcefully as he was able by the simplest method of reporting the truth. His main concern was to support a native literature that expressed Russia's true nature and his articles and reviews spoke to the development of Russian literature, its history and achievements, and to its future progression. An evolving national literature was seen as representative of Russia's national development and any progression in one sphere depended on the sincerity of the other. He insisted that, in order to meet the criteria of an authentic national voice, Russian literature needed to be free and popular and to move beyond folk

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[69] Belinsky, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 416.
[70] Belinsky, *Selected Philosophical Works*, pp. 420-421.
[71] Bowman, p. 204.
[72] Bowman, p. 206.
[73] Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, pp. 156-157.

poetry and narrow provincialism to a sophisticated reflection of the nation. This progression in Russia's national literature was part and parcel of the transition, through the expression of absolute truth, to Socialist Realism in the Soviet era.

In this regard of demanding accountability for truth, Belinsky has been accused of confusing art and life with serious consequences to the freedom of the writer.[74] Alexander Blok wrote that Belinsky damaged Russian literature even more than the censors, as while the latter may have delayed publications, the former poisoned the writing itself.[75]

> Bielinski (sic) thus originated the extremely dangerous principle of the responsibility borne by the writer towards his public, a principle that has poisoned Russian literature ever since. It infected the writer with guilt about his own salvation, and gave the public, or rather any politicized section of the public, the opportunity to blackmail him into expressing the proper feelings. The autonomy of art suffered a serious blow.[76]

In the Soviet era, and especially under Stalin's influence, ideas on aesthetics attributed to both Belinsky and Chernyshevsky, were mutilated to discourage free artistic expression except that which glorified the regime. Belinsky was hailed by the Soviets as the forerunner of Socialist Realism, a terrible charge laid at the feet of one so particularly dedicated to free expression for Belinsky never intended to destroy freethinking, only to ascribe a deeper purpose and value to art by using literature to expose Russia's suffering.[77] Only someone who feared the power of literature could apply such a rigorous standard to its content; Belinsky rather worshipped literature and its power to influence and to convey the inner longings of man. However, for the generation of revolutionaries which followed, the socialist cause became too great, urgent, and vital for art and literature to retain the luxury of frivolousness, and thus Belinsky's intentions regarding art's purpose were stretched to fit the revolutionaries' needs, applying moral constraints and even a nihilistic denial of any aesthetic function.[78] Belinsky had wanted Russia's national literature to reflect a deeper meaning in order to effect change and champion humanity, but in a twist of fate, the man who so despised the Tsarist censors actually assisted the censorship of the Soviets by demanding a rigid definition of "truth." As an

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[74] Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, p. 116.
[75] Randall, p. 125.
[76] Alain Besancon. Trans. Sarah Matthews. The Rise of the Gulag: The Intellectual Origins of Leninism (New York: Continuum, 1981), p. 89.
[77] Randall, p. 125.
[78] Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 107.
Bowman, p. 207.

idealist, Belinsky had not considered that truth could be relative and under the communist regime the freedom of art and literature took a serious blow that resulted even in death and imprisonment for writers who did not extol the 'truth' of communist life. Had Belinsky lived to see the consequences of his ideals and the methods he used to advertise them, he would have been deeply shamed for he never intended his quest for freedom to end in such despotism. And yet, oddly enough, the starting point for the transition to despotism is rooted in the innocence of his own idealism.

D) Testament of Idealism: The *Letter to Gogol* (*Pismo k Gogolu*)

While attempting to underscore nationhood and personality in Russia's literature, Belinsky spoke to his true agenda: Russia's political development on the path to a more humane existence. With this in mind, Belinsky brought fame to several mid-nineteenth century writers including Nikolai Gogol, who became an overnight literary success through Belinsky's championship of *The Inspector-General* and *Dead Souls*. Belinsky believed that Gogol's clever illustrations of Russian life complete with immoral characters and truthful depictions of behaviour, spoke to the author's leftist spirit, a literary friend in the battle against despotism. Gogol was repeatedly praised for rejecting the "false idealization of life" which caused Russia to spin its wheels in hopeless expectations of its own greatness.[79] For years Belinsky championed what he assumed were Gogol's intentions and held him up to the reading public as a model for a true national literature.[80] However, Belinsky was later proven mistaken when Gogol revealed either his true political leanings or a radical change of heart in his *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends* (1846), a reactionary work that spoke highly in favour of autocracy. Belinsky was crushed and lashed out at Gogol in a heated response that immediately circulated throughout Russia.[81] The letter served as the grand summation of Belinsky's thoughts and feelings, his final testament to everything he had wished for

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[79] Belinsky, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 356.
Partridge, p. 65.

[80] "The natural school now stands in the forefront of Russian literature… This could be achieved only by making art base itself exclusively on real life, eschewing all ideals. To do this it was necessary to make an exclusive study of the crowd, the mass, to depict ordinary people… And herein lies the great service rendered by Gogol." Belinsky, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 404, pp. 412-413.
Randall, pp. 46-47.

[81] Belinsky, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 414. Belinsky commented briefly on Gogol's *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends* only to say that "the memory of this book is today sustained only by the articles that deal with it." p. 487.
Randall, p. 97.

Russia, to everything the intelligentsia in the reign of Nicholas I had believed in, and would become a guiding light for the radicals who carried on under Alexander II. It is examined here in some detail for its idealism and strength of conviction, as Belinsky lashes out at Church and State for denying the Russian people their freedom and dignity.

Gogol's attempt to subvert liberalism had in fact provoked its greatest defence. His series of essays, *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends*, venerated the tsar, the Church, the landlords, obedient serfs, the censor, and the police "because everyone must serve God in his allotted station."[82] The work was highly conservative and completely astonished and sickened Belinsky, who could not pretend that Gogol had gone mad because "that book was not written in a single day, or week, or month, but very likely in one, two or three years; it shows coherence... one glimpses premeditation."[83] Gogol sent a letter to Belinsky expressing shock that his work had been badly received, and Belinsky took the opportunity to write a response while in the final stages of illness at the spa in Salzbrunn in Prussian Silesia. Annenkov, who was with Belinsky at the time, considered the letter a public document for it was written as though the author knew of its significance. Belinsky felt betrayed for Gogol had been a literary ideal and his ally in realism, the whole point of which was to struggle for freedom, not to defend the status quo so shamelessly, especially when Belinsky knew that Gogol understood the truth of the peasants' miserable existence, he had proven his awareness in *The Inspector-General* and *Dead Souls*: "Why, if you had made an attempt on my life I could not have hated you more than I do for these disgraceful lines... If you love Russia rejoice with me at the failure of your book!"[84] Copies of the letter were made and upon receiving his, Herzen said in a low voice, deeply moved: "This is a work of genius and I believe his testament."[85] In the public press, Belinsky had only hinted to his true meaning and this letter, written outside of the censors' reach, was like an explosion in the ears of its readers. It was smuggled, copied, and memorized, and although Herzen published it in 1855 in his London-based *Polar Star* (*Polyarnaya Zvezda*), it could not be published uncensored in Russia until 1905. The letter spread throughout Russia, some 20,000 copies are estimated to have circulated, at the risk of imprisonment and exile to those found in possession of

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[82] Gogol in Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 96.
[83] Belinsky, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 508.
[84] Belinsky, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 505, 510.
[85] Herzen in Randall, p. 110.

it.[86] Dostoyevsky was condemned to death, and later exiled to Siberia, for having read the letter to the members of the Petrashevsky circle.[87] Lenin described the letter as "one of the finest works of the uncensored democratic press, which has preserved its great and vital importance to this day."[88] It is one of the most important documents in Russian revolutionary history and vital to this thesis as an expression of idealism and its nature as a powerful force capable of leading men to extraordinary measures despite the cost, as men are so convinced by the truth of their own vision, to see it through, they are willing to accept horrific consequences. The *Letter to Gogol* provided the idealistic vision and unswerving determination that the revolutionary intelligentsia would later use to set aside their ethics.

The main thesis of Belinsky's letter was the hollowness of exalting autocracy and Orthodoxy in the name of the common good, when in fact these institutions served the very opposite, oppression itself. But the value of the letter lies in Belinsky's strength of conviction, the boldness with which he asserts his case, the boundless moral outrage he expresses, and the disgust he has for Russian institutions, their lies, their unfulfilled promises and their exhausting effect on national will. Anyone who read this letter at the time, in mid-nineteenth century Russia, would be taken aback by the stark truth and the vehemence of Belinsky's devotion to mankind. Quite simply, the letter was tailor-made to recruit revolutionaries to the socialist cause and to retain their devotion despite any obstacles for the cause was too worthy, too sincere, and far too important. And the overwhelming importance of the cause easily lent itself to dictatorial measures. While reading the letter, it is easy to imagine or even condone the use of force being used "to lead men forcibly to happiness." And why should this not happen? It would be for the peoples' own good after all, it was apparent that Belinsky had only the best intentions in

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[86] Randall, pp. 110-111.

[87] "The greatest charge that Dostoevsky knew had been made against him was that, at the Petrashevsky gathering of April 15, he had read aloud the exchange of correspondence between Gogol and Belinsky provoked by the former's *Selected Passages from My Correspondence with Friends*... Not only does Belinsky's letter bitterly denounce and demolish Gogol; it is equally violent against all those institutions of throne, state, and church that the erstwhile satirist had taken under his wing...Impudently, Dostoevsky read it aloud to the Palm-Durov circle and then repeated the performance at Petrashevsky's; even worse, by lending it to others who wished to make copies, he took part actively in its dissemination. It is very likely that the Speshnev group intended to publish Belinsky's *Letter* on the handpress they had just succeeded in assembling at the time of the arrests." Joseph Frank. Dostoevsky: The Years of Ordeal 1850-1859 (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 42.
Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, p. 173.

[88] Lenin in Randall, p. 111.

mind, it was obvious that he was noble and saintly for aching on behalf of the common man. It was evident that the nation really needed a revolutionary transformation! And yet, the answer to the question 'why not' evolved only much later, guessed at by Herzen, but coming to light only when it was too late, after the dictatorship of the 'proletariat' had already begun, a new dictatorship to replace the old but with the insidious addition of a noble ideology.

To begin with, Belinsky's sensibilities were horrified at the suggestion that the serfs should be obedient and illiterate as part of God's will. How could Gogol, or anyone, defend an existence based on suffering, even one so ingrained in the national consciousness as serfdom? Why should man meekly accept his own suffering as God's will, for what Creator could find misery pleasing? Belinsky uncovered his belief that every man was truly equal despite his station; a secular view of an original tenet of Christianity that everyone should be equal in life as they supposedly are in death, and need not wait for death before they can have their share of happiness:

> Had you really been inspired by the truth of Christ and not by the teaching of the Devil you would certainly have written something entirely different in your new book. You would have told the landowner that since his peasants are his brethren in Christ, and since a brother cannot be a slave to his brother, he should either give them their freedom, or, at least, allow them to enjoy the fruits of their labour to their greatest possible benefit, realizing as he does, in the depths of his conscience the false relationship in which he stands towards them.[89]

While Gogol wanted Russia to mire in darkness under the weight of dead institutions such as serfdom and autocracy, Belinsky envisioned a nation on a path to a life hitherto unknown on earth, one of complete equality and fulfillment. And therein lay the future of Russia, for a nation without tradition, without formal identity or religious devotion would move easily towards a revolutionary ideal (or so Belinsky thought; perhaps he did not believe that much force would be necessary to raise the people to a socialist lifestyle). Russia had wasted too much time appealing to God and the Tsar to intervene and it was time to act on its own behalf and abolish what was cruel and unbalanced in favour of what actually promoted personal happiness.

> Therefore you failed to realize that Russia sees her salvation not in mysticism, nor asceticism, nor pietism, but in the successes of civilization, enlightenment and humanity. What she needs is not sermons (she has heard enough of them!) or prayers (she has repeated them too often!), but the awakening in the people of a sense of their human dignity lost for so many centuries amid the dirt and refuse; she needs rights and laws conforming not with the preaching of the church but

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[89] Belinsky, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 505.

> with common sense and justice, and their strictest possible observance. Instead of which she presents the dire spectacle of a country where men traffic in men, without even having the excuse so insidiously exploited by the American plantation owners who claim that a Negro is not a man… The most vital national problems in Russia today are the abolition of serfdom and corporal punishments…"[90]

The first step in Russia's journey lay in discovering a sense of decency and human conscience and in abolishing those institutions that served neither sentiment, for the root of brotherhood lay in promoting the freedom of others as well as the rights of oneself. Autocracy, nationality, and Orthodoxy, the three cornerstones of Russia's existence had denied freedom at every turn as their power was based on the most evil of man's intentions, self-preservation and greed, rather than a sincere desire to promote society's well being. Belinsky considered the teachings of the Orthodox Church in opposition to Christ's intentions for mankind and to follow the false idol of religion into oppression simply because of blind loyalty to tradition was a betrayal not only to mankind but also to Christ himself. He railed against Gogol, and all of Russia, for confusing Orthodoxy with sincere adherence to Christ's teachings.

> Proponent of the knout, apostle of ignorance, champion of obscurantism and Stygian darkness, panegyrist of Tartar morals… That you base such teaching on the Orthodox Church I can understand: it has always served as the prop of the knout and the servant of despotism; but why have you mixed Christ up in this? What in common have you found between Him and any church, least of all the Orthodox Church? He was the first to bring to people the teaching of freedom, equality and brotherhood and set the seal of truth to that teaching by martyrdom… And that is why a man like Voltaire who stamped out the fires of fanaticism and ignorance in Europe by ridicule, is, of course, more the son of Christ, flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone, than all your priests, bishops, metropolitans and patriarchs![91] He who is capable of suffering at the sight of other people's suffering and who is pained at the sight of other people's oppression, bears Christ within his bosom and has no need to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem… you have failed to grasp either the spirit or the form of Christianity of our time. Your book breathes not the true Christian teaching but the morbid fear of death, of the devil and of hell![92]

The *Letter to Gogol* was steeped in "the Puritanism of revolutionaries."[93] Belinsky believed that inward goodness was the essence of religion and not the outward forms so easily practiced without accountability for man's behaviour outside the church walls. Those pious men, who went to church in the morning, went home in the afternoon to

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[90] Belinsky, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 504.
[91] Belinsky, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 506.
[92] Belinsky, *Selected Philosophical Works*, pp. 510-511.
[93] Randall, pp. 115-116.

whip their serfs. It was absurd to think that Russian society was based on man's inequality, on injustice for all but a few, under the pretence of religiosity and the power of brutality, when in fact the Russian people were not at all religious by nature. It was absurd to think that a system based on inequity should exist for any reason at all, especially in the name of God, and as such religion in Russia had been relegated to a foolish pastime; Russia's spirituality had been debased and the people were left entirely without hope of salvation while alive on this earth.

> But do you really mean to say you do not know that our clergy is held in universal contempt by Russian society and the Russian people? Of whom do the Russian people relate obscene stories? Of the priest, the priest's wife, the priest's daughter and the priest's farm hand. Does not the priest in Russia represent for all Russians the embodiment of gluttony, avarice, servility and shamelessness? Do you mean to say that you do not know all this? Strange! According to you the Russian people is the most religious in the world. That is a lie! The basis of religiousness is pietism, reverence, fear of God. Whereas the Russian man utters the name of the Lord while scratching himself somewhere. He says of the icon: *if it isn't good for praying it's good for covering the pots*.[94] Take a closer look and you will see that it is by nature a profoundly atheistic people. It still retains a good deal of superstition, but not a trace of religiousness... The Russian people is different; mystic exaltation is not in its nature; it has too much common sense, a too lucid and positive mind, and therein, perhaps, lies the vast scope of its historic destinies in the future.[95]

For Belinsky, the religiosity of the Russian people was suspect and misleading, and he considered that they were not in awe of the Orthodox Church and recognized the insincere overtures of their oppressor, but that their practical nature dictated that they use religion as a national pastime rather than a spiritual advisor in their affairs; an icon is useful, if not for praying, then for covering pots. The Russian people were not so sentimental as to cling blindly to faith, their common sense allowed them to sense their own humanity and decency without the tenets of official religion, practiced so insincerely by the regime. It was only a matter of time before the people recognized what was true and what was false, and upon awakening, Russia would immediately correct herself and gravitate towards the most natural and humane political system ever devised.

In summary, Belinsky's *Letter to Gogol*, for the first time in uncensored form, exposed the hypocrisy of official life in Russia and tore open revolutionary feeling on behalf of the common man, who was no longer suffering in silence. There was so much anger in the letter, so much moral outrage, but also so much honesty that it was difficult

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[94] Belinsky, *Selected Philosophical Works*, pp. 506-507.
[95] Belinsky, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 507.

for those who read it to ignore the truth of their existence, the truth of their behaviour towards others as landowners, serf-owners, merchants, and noblemen, as any worthwhile person who considered him or herself to be decent but in fact was the most indecent and beguiled of all peoples! Belinsky's *Letter* stirred up many emotions in its readers: gratitude, revulsion, shock, admiration, anger, confusion, disbelief, sadness, but most of all, an awareness that whether for good or ill, action must be taken that would change the very way society functioned towards a nation attuned to true and humane behaviour, in other words, an ideal world, and most pointedly, that no cost should be spared in this noble quest. Belinsky's fervent idealism and refusal to pander to any societal construct that hindered progress and enlightenment was fuelled by the rage and bitterness of his class, and reading these angry lines, it was no wonder that the revolutionaries discarded their compassion and wielded only their devotion to the total transformation of Russia. Although Belinsky was not alone in his views or even very original, his *Letter* was akin to a stirring revolutionary pamphlet whose idealism attracted many adherents to the socialist cause.

E) The Role of Idealism in Shaping Authoritarianism in Russian Socialism: Vissarion Belinsky

Belinsky contributed to the original impetus towards socialism by creating an ethos centred on individual salvation, one that beleaguered the conscience and demanded resolution. The next generation of revolutionaries embraced his idealism and with relentless ambition attempted to implement Belinsky's ideal world, whatever the consequences to free will. Socialism appealed to Belinsky as a means to liberate the human personality, to allow every person a free and cooperative stake in their own lives, thereby ending man's subjugation and allowing basic human instincts to emerge. The dehumanizing effects of autocracy compelled man to fight for survival, concerned only with self-preservation at the expense of his neighbour without recourse to a more humane form of existence. Belinsky relished in the threat socialism presented to traditional ideas and conventions, and the ethical demands it would place on man's perception of human relations, based not on society's expectations but rather on decency and pure intention. His faith lay in the promise of equality and he understood socialism as the most humane and utopian political system ever devised for promoting individual salvation.[96]

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[96] Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, p. 172. Dostoyevsky said of Belinsky many years after his death: "He believed... that socialism not only does not destroy the freedom of the individual

> There will be neither rich nor poor, neither kings nor subjects, there will be brethren, there will be men… And that will be effected through sociality. And hence there is no object more noble and lofty than to contribute towards its progress and development.[97]

However, Belinsky does not appear to have been sentimental or deluded about the revolutionary aspects of what he was proposing, asserting that the fate of mankind was so worthwhile: "to make the least part of it happy I believe I could destroy the rest of it with fire and sword… I feel that if I were a king I would surely become a tyrant.[98] Statements like these coincided with Lenin's determination in later years, and Nicholas Berdyaev labels Belinsky as the forerunner of Bolshevik morality and as one disposed to dictatorship.[99] Given Belinsky's overall philosophy and outlook, it is possible that his original sentiment may have been less ruthless and more desperate and theatrical in nature, but the slippery path from idealism to authoritarianism is nonetheless discernible. His ideals were so absolute that it would take a tyrant to implement them, and yet, this was held to be noble since the cause itself was noble. In actuality, Belinsky abhorred even the smallest amount of human suffering, as when Ivan Karamazov says in Dostoyevsky's novel *Brothers Karamazov*: "I absolutely repudiate the highest harmony; it is not worth the tears of this one tortured child."[100] That Belinsky despised suffering, however, does not mean he would not endure a small amount of it, if this were to lead to the end of misery entirely. Although undoubtedly neither Belinsky nor Herzen could have adequately predicted the scope of destruction, Pavel Annekov wrote that both men "did not ask for, yet were not afraid of, the ruins which socialism was to bring."[101] Belinsky even condoned force outright, writing, "men are so insensate that they must forcibly be led to happiness."[102] Perhaps this was meant in sadness regarding the truth of man's inability to effect change without violence, or perhaps he truly meant that force was necessary, but decidedly without comprehending the vast implications of this statement for it seems impossible that he would have condoned the actions of the Stalinist era, for there were too many parallels with the Tsarist regime. His seemingly Jacobin revelations regarding bloodshed are perhaps more representative of his expansive and

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personality but, on the contrary, restores it to unheard of splendour, on new and this time adamantine foundations."

[97] Belinsky, *Selected Philosophical Works*, pp. 165-166
[98] Belinsky, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 158.
[99] Berdyaev, *The Origin of Russian Communism*, pp. 41-43.
[100] Dostoyevsky in Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 77.
[101] Annenkov in Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 83.
[102] Belinsky, *Selected Philosophical Works*, pp. 165-166

dramatic nature, but regardless of intent they would eventually be understood as a methodology for the revolutionary elite who translated Belinsky's passion in violent ways.[103] Most telling of all, Belinsky seemed to recognize that a revolutionary battle would be necessary: "it is absurd to imagine that this could happen by itself, with the aid of time, without violent changes, without bloodshed... And of what significance is the blood of thousands compared to the degradation and sufferings of the millions."[104] This sentiment could have been the guiding philosophy for Stalin and how unimaginable that one so disposed to human liberty and equality as Belinsky, should have provided Stalin with the justification for his murders. Belinsky's idealism betrayed him as it would betray Russia; a nation swept up in its promises and held prisoner by its sanctity. How could anyone escape the logic of idealism without appearing a traitor to the noblest dreams ever conceived? It is a dangerous position for anyone to hold the monopoly on truth. Belinsky wanted his ideals fulfilled so urgently that he was prepared to advocate violence and he did not perceive that the very action he condoned to achieve freedom would negate that freedom almost instantly. Belinsky's contradictory position as an idealist opposed to human suffering but thirsty for change was reconciled by the notion that the rewards of socialism would make up for the sacrifice; this reconciliation would not sit well with Herzen, however, who understood that idealism was a force that could be wielded, capable of commanding the will of others and demanding increasing sacrifices to feed its own sense of correctness.

Despite all Belinsky's recorded efforts to dispel dogmatism and conformist thought, his words were often used in the Soviet period to underwrite ruthlessness, a disservice to Belinsky's humanism. His ideas were well suited to every ideological camp, however, for they could be simultaneously compassionate and ruthless, as Belinsky was prone to overstating his case on account of his passion, thereby appearing unscrupulous when he was perhaps just dedicated. The radical "men of the sixties" were inspired by his idealism and adopted ideological stances that spoke to Belinsky's single-mindedness rather than to his compassionate nature, as these two personal aspects could exist together only in the character of Belinsky himself. The revolutionary intelligentsia could not jeopardize the socialist cause through bourgeois compassion, as it was undoubtedly at odds in achieving the final aim, and therefore they adopted only his devotion to

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[103] Philip Pomper. The Russian Revolutionary Intelligentsia (Arlington Heights, Illinois: Harlan Davidson Inc., 2nd ed. 1993), pp. 44-45.
[104] Belinsky, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 166.

overarching change. Belinsky did not realize that in arguing the case for the individual's right to a full life, he subjected man to a new generality, a communal organization of society that, in this early stage in man's spiritual development, could only be achieved through coercion. As an idealist, Belinsky did not take free will into consideration, and nor could he, for an ideal world required each and every person to have precisely the same vision. Hence, the thesis presented here is strongly evidenced in Belinsky: that ideals, however utopian or well intentioned, have the power to enslave. Belinsky was a man perfectly committed to liberty and equality, and yet his dedication inadvertently set the Russian people on a path not to freedom, but to an oppressive existence, one altogether worse (the unprecedented death toll in the purges, famines, and prison system) than the Tsarist regime they were seeking to escape. Idealism is a dangerous force if wielded with certainty and without respect for relative notions of truth. The unintended consequences of Belinsky's intellectual thought are open for debate even at the present time, but the moral basis for his life and the purpose of his thought while he lived and breathed were rooted in hope for freedom, and this impetus drove the Russian intelligentsia to zealously embrace the socialist cause, and later Marxism, at the expense of all else, leading down the path to a well-intentioned dictatorship that would use any measure to serve the idealistic vision of a select few. Frustrated idealism is the root of authoritarianism, for revolutionaries will resort to whatever means necessary to achieve their hopes for mankind. Alexander Herzen was also an idealist responsible for guiding the revolutionary intelligentsia on the path to authoritarianism, but an idealist with a vastly different perspective on the violence he was proposing, for Herzen repeatedly warned against the use of dictatorial measures, as is examined in the next chapter.

> Yes, we have the national life in us, we are ordained to give our message, our thought to the world; but what message, what thought, it is too early to conjecture. Our grandchildren or great-grandchildren will learn that without any effort at hard guessing, because that message and that thought will be uttered by them...[105]

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[105] Belinsky, *Selected Philosophical Works*, pp. 362-363.

III) Alexander Herzen 1812-1870

In 1848, while Belinsky lay dying, Alexander Herzen stood surrounded by revolution in Paris, watching violence unfold in the name of lofty ideals. He had emigrated to the West to join in the struggle for freedom, but witnessed the idealism of the European Revolutions descend into dictatorial behaviour. Herzen realized the inherent danger in leading men forcibly towards a select destiny; the horrific violence and the betrayed idealism of 1848 tempered his earlier enthusiasm for violent upheaval and opened his eyes to the despotism latent in ultimate solutions. He came to regard the triumph of any ideal as the triumph of authoritarianism, since in order for true liberty to succeed, each man must come to his own conclusion without coercion and with the spiritual wherewithal to respect the ideals of others.[106] One cannot violate liberty to preserve or install liberty, as seemingly noble aims are capable of having a negative impact on human rights. Does the end justify the means, and is freedom ever able to succeed if inaugurated with brute force? Herzen recognized the contradiction between ideals at this stage in human evolution, the incompatibility between human desires that led men towards selfish and competitive behaviour. In order for socialism to succeed, it would need to be enforced thereby abrogating the freedom of choice on the path to ultimate freedom. Herzen's ideas were before their time, for he knew that socialism would require a revolution of the human personality before a revolution of society. He repeatedly warned against the dangers of idealism: of the overarching devotion idealism inspired which distorted the original intent, and the basic incompatibility between the ideals of one man and those of another which disrupted the notion of absolute truth. In a telling quotation, Herzen emphasized how quickly idealism turns to violence when a single doctrine is not readily adopted, and how easily a love of freedom can turn into a love of force: "you would curse those human cattle and your love would turn to hatred, or worse yet, into contempt. For all your atheism [your disbelief in autocracy and dictatorial government], you would be ready to enter a monastery [with you yourselves becoming dictators]."[107]

Disillusioned by corruption in the West, and in systems of politics and justice he had previously held as models for emulation, Herzen felt that Russia should not trust democratic-capitalism which was little better than autocracy in regards to a glorified ideology hiding the truth of an unequal existence. He instead advocated a utopian form of

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[106] Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 227.
[107] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 408.

peasant socialism based on the unspoiled traditions of the Russian peasant commune, or *obshchina*, and he promoted the revolutionary potential of the countryside in his *Free Russian Press* (*Volnaya russkaya tipografya*). Herzen predicted that the greatest happiness for mankind resided in the complete absence of authority, whereby individual will was given free reign guided only by human decency and a sense of brotherhood or community. Unlike communism in the twentieth century, Herzen's socialism was not concerned with control but rather with anarchy, with the complete absence of centralized government, law and private property, and only common sense and good will regulating human relations. In other words, each man would regulate himself according to an enlightened conscience. However, Herzen recognized that mankind was not yet ready for a utopian social system based on brotherhood and yet he continued to follow his conscience and advocate the most liberal political system possible. Just as Chekhov wrote, "It's odd how people fear freedom (*stranno shto liudi boiatsia svobody*)," Herzen also realized that human beings could not avoid the temptation to lead others and also to be led by others. People do not trust the behaviour of either their own selves or each other and hence feel the need for regulation whether from the priest, the policeman, or the politician.

Herzen was in the awkward position of advocating the complete socialist transformation of Russia, but without faith in the people's political or spiritual maturity to carry out the transition. While he used the tool of persuasion to the utmost, coercion or force was off-limits in implementing even so noble a future. He warned the radical revolutionaries, that in their determination to alleviate Russia's suffering, they were headed towards the same dictatorial abyss, through impatience and ill-placed devotion to revolution rather than liberty. The idea of using a 'broom rather an axe' to transform Russia went largely unheeded, and Herzen was forced to issue caution like an out-of-touch father to disrespectful sons for the germ of idealism had spread in the minds of his successors to include the belief that socialist freedom could exist beneath a well-intentioned dictatorship. Faced with the option of gradual spiritual evolution long into the future, the revolutionary intelligentsia chose to implement the future quickly and forcefully due to their overarching idealism. Had the intelligentsia been less idealistic, Russia may have instead worked towards gradual enlightenment and the last century of repression and fear (including the fear of nuclear annihilation) might have been avoided. However, at the time of the Russian Revolution, only very few could guess at the consequences of absolute idealism, Herzen being one of those few.

This chapter is devoted to uncovering Herzen's socialist theories and their idealistic basis, along with noting his warnings regarding the fallibility of idealism and its potentially destructive outcome. The chapter is divided into seven sections, similar to those in the previous chapter but with a larger emphasis on Herzen's political thinking since he is credited with the development of Russian socialism. As with Belinsky, the first section, *An Idealist from the Gentry*, is intended to give an outline of Herzen's life, a necessary framework for his idealism and his theories on liberty. The second section, *The Publicity of Idealism: Herzen's Bell*, provides an overview of Herzen's influence on his contemporaries and successors, following his career as a publisher in Europe, with his role in the emancipation of the serfs and in creating the Populist movement. *Guilt and Moral Philosophy*, the following section, covers Herzen's philosophical development from a belief in the forces of history, to the role of man in shaping his own destiny. The next two sections deal with Herzen's disillusionment with capitalism and bourgeois society, *Herzen's Idealism versus Democratic-Capitalism*, on the path to socialism, *Socialism: the Vehicle for Idealism*. These sections demonstrate how idealism affected the choice of socialism and include his views on the peasant commune, his frustration with authority, and how Herzen came to believe that even his own idealism was detrimental to human liberty. The section thereafter deals with Herzen's views on violent revolution, *The Role of Revolution in an Idealistic Future*, an indictment against the use of force in liberation. The sixth section, *Idealistic Fathers and Ruthless Sons: The Dispute over Action,* highlights the discrepancy between the ideals of Belinsky and Herzen and the actions of their successors as the revolutionary intelligentsia of the 1860s and 1870s actively worked towards revolution and a socialist society. The final section, *The Role of Absolute Ideals in Shaping Authoritarianism in Russian Socialism: Alexander Herzen*, sums up the thesis with regards to Herzen that idealism led to the authoritarianism of the communist regime despite his warnings to that effect.

A) An Idealist from the Gentry:

Herzen's childhood and the circumstances of his life fostered an attraction to the suffering of man and thus to an idealistic frame of mind, powerfully documented in his famous memoirs *My Past and Thoughts* (*Byloe I Dumy*). He was born a wealthy nobleman, a "gentry revolutionary," preoccupied with the burdens of man without ever

having experienced them directly.[108] His humanist instincts and concern for mankind arose out of guilt surrounding his wealthy and secure position, and in a telltale moment, at the age of 14, together with his lifelong friend Nicholas Ogarev (1813-1877), he swore to avenge the martyrs of the Decembrist Rebellion, his youthful heroes, some who lost their lives and others forced into exile for demanding reform. In 1829, Herzen enrolled in Moscow University and discovered the writers and philosophers of the Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment: Schiller, Goethe, Hegel, Saint-Simon and Fourier, who provided a framework for his revolutionary thoughts. He believed in the autonomy and dignity of the individual and opposed the State for oppressing the common man. Upon discovering socialism, Herzen projected his concern for the individual onto society at large, envisioning a loose federation of free individuals. His views on liberty were unique in their faith that man could be capable of self-regulation without the authority of state, church, or even a system of justice other than that proposed by the consensus of the local community. Herzen was an idealist, a nobleman aware of his pampered existence against the backdrop of human suffering who wanted to alter Russia's future along an ideal path.

Herzen's most productive intellectual period in Russia was during the "remarkable decade" of 1838 to 1848, the height of idealistic theorizing for the intelligentsia. He devoured German Romantic thought and French socialism and succeeded in forging the political conscious of the Russian intelligentsia, especially in regards to his opposition to authority.[109] He composed numerous essays, short stories and a series of articles for the *Annals of the Fatherland* (*Otechestvenniye Zapiski*). He was deeply embroiled in the battle between the Slavophiles and his own camp, the Westernizers, in deciding the course of Russia's past and future. Herzen and Ogarev also developed a philosophical circle, similar to that of Stankevich, devoted to the study of the French socialists. Saint-Simon was a particular favourite for attempting to "to bring about a world of new relations between men" and rendering "its total judgement on the old order of things."[110] Herzen discovered Fourier's communal living, Louis Blanc's organization of labour and capital, and Proudhon's theories of private property, but he did not assign himself solely to any school, recognizing that Russia's socialism should be

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[108] Martin Malia. Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1961), pp. 421-424.

[109] Franco Venturi. Roots of Revolution: A History of the Populist and Socialist Movements in Nineteenth Century Russia. Trans. Francis Haskell. (London: Phoenix Press, 1952, 1972), pp. 22-23.

[110] Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 233.

rather more spontaneous.[111] Rather than imitate Western thinkers, Herzen embraced elements that fit Russia's challenges and interpreted them according to her needs, which led to the development of his unique views on Russian peasant socialism.

Herzen also wrote an important novel steeped in social commentary, published in 1845-1846, entitled *Who is to Blame?* (*Kto vinovat?*). Belinsky hailed the novel despite its artistic shortcomings, as a work of great importance for railing against the social conventions that imprison the spirit of man and for veraciously depicting contemporary life.[112] The novel provides insight into Herzen's mindset that the goal of life should be happiness, but that the circumstances of Russia at that time made it nearly impossible. His novel centred on a love triangle, dangling the question of who was to blame for the tragedy of the situation, the individuals or the environment in which they lived. Rather than accept the tragedy of the situation, Herzen's idealism begged the question of why the situation could not have turned out differently, since the characters were driven to behave contrary to their natures. Each character was a product of an environment that was depicted truthfully, providing a sense of society's cruelty and unfairness to the workings of the mind and heart.[113] Institutions of family, marriage, education, bureaucracy, and the status of women were brought into question, as polite society advocated principles that in the end reduced any chance of happiness. Herzen wondered out loud as to why Russia continued to behave according to convention when in fact this artificiality offered few rewards; after all, should not happiness be the aim of existence? The central thesis was that man was forced to behave according to the conventions of tradition and society and therefore existed in an artificial and repressive void responsible for ills such as criminal behaviour. The insolubility of life's problems and the central question of who was to blame, did not present any firm answers. Herzen made clear, however, his hostility to the social and political structure, his sympathy for the peasants, and his frustration at man's weakness and perceived helplessness.[114] The weakness of the characters could be

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[111] Malia, *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism*, p. 320.

[112] "It is this feeling of humanity that constitutes, so to say, the soul of Iskander's works [Herzen's pen name]. He is its proponent, its advocate... Even those of his personages whose feelings and odious acts repel us are shown by the author more as victims of their own ignorance and the environment in which they live than of their ill-nature. He describes crimes that are not challenged by existing laws and are qualified by most people as rational and moral behaviour." Belinsky, *Selected Philosophical Works*, pp. 447-448.

[113] Michael R. Katz, Introduction. Who is to Blame? By Alexander Herzen. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 25-39.

[114] "(The hero is) too idealistic and too honest to accept the squalor and the lies of conventional society, too weak and too civilized to work effectively for their destruction, and

attributed to defects in Russian society, bringing into question personal responsibility for taking hold of one's life, an important theme for the revolutionary intelligentsia since they would later decide it too irresponsible to hold out for gradual enlightenment. In mid-nineteenth century Russia, there was a barrenness of activity even though reform was desperately needed, and the characters all realized this discrepancy between knowledge and activity and suffered for it. As Pisarev wrote, they possessed "knowledge without will," while later characters would unite the two into "thought and deed," demonstrating the evolution of the intelligentsia's revolutionary consciousness from assigning responsibility to practical activity.[115] The revolutionary intelligentsia added the next logical step, and Chernyshevsky's novel, *What is to be Done?* (1863), redefined middle class social values for the next generation, instructing its readers on how to take responsibility for their own happiness and that of others by discarding convention and living as their natures intended.

The 1830s and 1840s were both remarkable and frustrating for Herzen, since intellectual activity among Russia's most idealistic minds was spread intermittently with periods of arrest and exile. In 1834, Herzen was arrested for spreading anti-government propaganda and on the pretext of a revolutionary student song, allegedly sung by his friends though he had not even been present.[116] As the son of a wealthy nobleman, his sentence was light, and Herzen was granted the only slightly less tortuous confinement of a government post in the provinces.[117] He was exiled to Vyatka, on the eastern edge of European Russia, and after four years of working as a civil servant, was granted a transfer to Vladimir, closer to Moscow. In 1840, he was permitted to return to Moscow, and was offered a government post in St. Petersburg that proved to be short-lived.[118] A letter to his father alluding to police corruption was intercepted and Herzen was again exiled for spreading propaganda, this time to Novgorod. He returned to Moscow once more in 1842, by this time a leading intellectual awash in ideology, but with deep resentment towards authority and frustration at Russia's slavery. As the remarkable decade grew to a close, the endless discussions and theorizing of the intelligentsia grew tiresome for

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consequently displaced from his proper function and doomed to poison his own life and the life of others… Everything is partly the fault of the individual character, partly the fault of circumstance, partly in the nature of life itself." Isaiah Berlin in Katz, pp. 32-33.

[115] From Pisarev's article "*Bazarov*" (1862) in Katz, p. 37.

[116] Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, pp. 172-178.

[117] Adam B. Ulam. Prophets and Conspirators in Pre-revolutionary Russia (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers: 1998, 1977), p. 32.

[118] Katz, pp. 18-22.

Herzen, as they ceaselessly hashed out Russia's history, seemingly without serious intention for her future. Their discussions were detached from the people and the government, locked in the backrooms of society, retreating further into inactivity, disillusionment and isolation: "thought without action is a dream."[119] It was not enough to theorize about Russia's prospects in idle conversation and political impotence, Herzen wished to engage in practical activity for reform, an impossible task in mid-nineteenth century Russia.[120]

After his father died in 1847, Herzen received a large inheritance and decided to leave behind the constant police surveillance and the endless frustrations, and go to Europe while he was still able. A highly gifted and intelligent man, Herzen wished to control his own life, to live where he liked, to write, discuss, and even sing what he liked, without fear of persecution. Above all, he wished to actively participate in something progressive and the birthplace of his cherished philosophies, Western Europe, was highly appealing as a realm for revolutionary study. In 1847, the Herzen family secured exit permits and travelled through Germany to Paris in time for a thorough lesson in revolution. Although the Russian government twice ordered Herzen to return and his fortune was confiscated, he flatly refused and recovered his inheritance through his connections to the Rothschilds and the influence of the British government.

> I have too long been a free man to suffer myself again to be enchained. I have lived through popular movements and have grown accustomed to free speech. Am I again to become a serf?... Europe never regarded its citizens residing abroad as criminals or anyone emigrating to America as a traitor.[121]

From 1847 until his death in 1870, Herzen wandered across Europe as an intellectual exile, a "*gentilhomme russe citoyen du monde*."[122] He lived in Paris, London, Nice, Geneva, Rome and Venice, witnessing history, meeting great minds, and writing memoirs full of history, humanism, and wit. Herzen came to know western Europe as he knew his homeland and he often compared the two: Russia was "savage like a wild beast of the forest, but full of slumbering forces," while Europe was "cankered, time-worn", full of the "hereditary, intangible subtleties of corruption."[123] He came to believe that European solutions did not hold promise for Russia, and that his homeland could do better in her historical development by being true to ideal principles of liberty and equality rather than

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[119] Herzen in Venturi, p. 16.
[120] Venturi, pp. 24-26.
[121] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, pp. 342-343.
[122] Dostoevsky's epithet in Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 180.
[123] Herzen in Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 180.

pay lip-service to ideals through half-hearted measures. Whether he intended it or not, Herzen never returned to Russia but his mind and soul were constantly aimed in her direction.

Herzen suffered many personal setbacks in his life, the death of his mother, a young son, his wife, family drama and betrayal, separation and a rootless existence, the loss of friends and of faith, all of which he wove together in *My Past and Thoughts.* Added to personal tragedy was the "sickness of truth," he was saddened by what he knew about human nature and yet he pursued ideology relentlessly, even though everything he learned reinforced the meaninglessness of suffering and the tragedies which lay ahead should the revolutionary intelligentsia forge ahead without conscience. "He was capable, as few other Russians were capable, of transposing tragedy into a clear key, of making us feel that even pain can be lucid, sun-lit."[124] Herzen's death in Paris in 1870 went largely unnoticed. He died concerned for Russia's future and unable to shake the feeling that, in their haste, the radical younger generation had manhandled his theories, twisting pure ideals into something quite terrible. Herzen had succumbed to: "The curse of future liberals and moderate Socialists: the consciousness of being outdistanced in one's radicalism and of being confronted with a more uncompromising and unscrupulous revolutionary resolve that produced inner doubts and a sense of inferiority."[125] In a twist of fate, the father of Russian socialism who devoted his life to developing and advertising an ideal future for Russia, was too timid to see its immediate implementation for he sensed the despotism lurking in even his own prescriptions. Herzen's warnings went unheeded, perhaps because he spoke out of both sides of his mouth, crying out for socialist liberty while simultaneously begging the revolutionary intelligentsia to assume patience. However, behind his fractured conscience lay astounding theories of personal and political liberty and it is only in recent years that the sincere humanism, wit and grace of this man are being discovered in the West, along with the profound insight into human nature that allowed Herzen to regard idealism with a wary eye.

B) The Publicity of Idealism: Herzen's Bell

The Tsar would have done better to leave Herzen alone in his native Russia then to pester a man of his will into taking action abroad. Herzen acquired great influence in both Europe and Russia with his uncensored pen; his major works included *Letters from*

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[124] Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, pp. 191-192.

[125] Adam B. Ulam. Lenin and the Bolsheviks: The Intellectual and Political History of the Triumph of Communism in Russia (London: Secker & Warburg, 1965), p. 51.

France and Italy (1847), *From the Other Shore* (1848-1850), *The Russian People and Socialism* (*Le people russe et le socialisme, Lettres a M. Jules Michelet*), *Ends and Beginnings* (1862-1863), in addition to *My Past and Thoughts*, his masterful autobiography of the nineteenth century, published separately over a sixteen-year period. *From the Other Shore* made Herzen famous in Western Europe, having a greater impact at the time than Marx's *Manifesto*, for its ruthless criticism of bourgeois-capitalism and revolutionary enthusiasm for the socialist shore that lay beyond 1848.[126] His main occupation in the years after immigrating to Europe, however, was fanning the flame of public opinion and voicing Russia's suffering through his *Free Russian Press* (*Volnaya russkaya tipografya*). His émigré journal *The Bell* (*Kolokol*) was particularly influential in the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, and he used his press to develop and advertise his theories on peasant socialism and to inspire the Populist movement in Russia, the first large-scale attempt by the intelligentsia to alert the masses to their idealistic possibilities.

The *Free Russian Press*, which Herzen established in London in 1853 with Polish technical assistance and underground press distribution, was his mouthpiece for his political and philosophical views. In the first issue "To our brothers in Russia," Herzen declared his intention to break the silence of censorship by publishing anything that was illegal for print in Russia.[127] Although literary persecution was at its highest in Russia under Nicholas I, and few of Herzen's publications got through before 1856, the lighter atmosphere under Alexander II permitted a wider audience.[128] In 1855, he began publishing the *Polar Star* (*Polyarnaya Zvezda*), a popular magazine featuring the profiles of the executed Decembrists on the cover, and *The Bell* was later added as a bimonthly supplement. For the first time, Russia possessed an uncensored forum for public opinion and her conscience was laid bare before the government and the people, as the truth of mid-nineteenth century Russia lay exposed in veracious revelations of injustice, cruelty, oppression, corruption, and abuse: "After all, the writer is a teacher of the people... and a great writer is, so to speak, a second government."[129] *The Bell* provided an honest picture of Russian life and hence the government, and even the Tsar himself, followed it closely to learn of scandals and to gauge public opinion, at times sending information anonymously. Herzen used this unparalleled opportunity of free expression to propound his socialist theories and to motivate his readers into seeking political alternatives and

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[126] Partridge, p. 73.
[127] Venturi, p. 92.
[128] Malia, *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism*, p. 394.
[129] Solzhenitsyn in Ulam, *Prophets and Conspirators in Pre-revolutionary Russia*, p. 31.

rediscovering their potential. He wrote many of the articles himself, but he freely published the works of his contemporaries, including censored works by Pushkin and Belinsky's famous *Letter to Gogol*.[130] For the intellectuals of the period, it was refreshing to behold forbidden opinions, unmasked from behind the Aesopian language of domestic publications. Herzen was a genius of revolutionary agitation, and *The Bell* was published bimonthly from 1857 to 1867, at his own expense. Although the height of its circulation in 1860 was around 3000, the actual readership should be multiplied tenfold for it was copied, memorized, and passed around, a remarkable figure for an illegal publication.[131]

The Bell was critical in creating support for the intelligentsia and their ideologies, both at home and abroad, and in pressing Russian politics towards Emancipation. Herzen was an ardent advocate of education, self-government, and freedom. In the pages of *The Bell*, he demanded: the election of judges, the independence of the courts, the inviolability of the person, freedom of press, conscience and religion, the admission of women to universities, unrestricted trade, abolition of the conscript system, the adoption of a new legal code, and non-intervention of military authorities in civil affairs.[132] Herzen championed the interests of the masses but the emancipation of the serfs was the matter closest to his heart, and he watched the slow unfolding of government reform with great anxiety. He had initially welcomed the reign of Alexander II as a new era of reform and both his encouragement and threats were an important contributory factor in the final Emancipation. He did not shy away from addressing the Tsar directly in his publications, or even from expressing approval of certain measures.[133] In 1858, Herzen called upon the peasants to take up the axe should the Tsar fail to grant their freedom and, in June 1860, he further castigated the Tsar for allowing the matter to drag on without resolution.[134] Russia waited patiently through five years of commissions and drafts, and Herzen warned that the time had passed when "one could expect anything from the government."[135] The central sticking point had been whether the peasants should be freed with or without land, and it was important to Herzen that they receive the land they had tilled for generations. He had been pressing his case for emancipation with land since 1853, when the issue was first openly discussed in his *St. George's Day* pamphlet, (the one day of the year when the

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[130] Partridge, p. 73.
[131] Ulam, *Prophets and Conspirators in Pre-revolutionary Russia*, p. 39.
[132] G. Teryaev. A.I. Herzen: Great Russian Thinker and Revolutionary Democrat (Moscow, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1954), pp. 76-77.
[133] Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, pp. 186-187.
[134] Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 250.
[135] Ulam, *Prophets and Conspirators in Pre-revolutionary Russia*, pp. 44-45.

peasants had been able to change masters freely until the reign of Boris Godunov, 1598-1605). Herzen had appealed "To the Russian Nobility" to abandon their privileges and to liberate the serfs voluntarily while there was still time to avoid peasant revolts. He repeatedly accused the nobles of cowardice and immorality and he compared Russian serfs to the American slaves.[136] Through his constant agitation, "the great London exile" made the Tsar realise that emancipation would either come through reform from above or revolution from below.[137]

In the end, the Emancipation Act was deeply disappointing as the peasants were forced to pay heavy reparations, and Herzen admitted the fruitlessness of appealing to the autocratic government for change. His language became explosive, crying out to Russian intellectuals to set up discussion groups, run illegal presses, and to go out among the people and enlighten them. As peasant disorders broke out and universities were closed in the ferment of 1861-1863, *The Bell's* battle cry was "Go to the people," thereby giving rise to the Populist movement.[138] Herzen urged the burgeoning Populists to share revolutionary principles and goals with the peasant masses, as the only sound way to lead the people to revolution was to educate them in the ways of socialist liberty. Populism, or *narodnichestvo*, was based on Herzen's ideas, including distrust in democracy or any centralized political authority, faith in the *obshchina*, a belief in the development of peasant socialism in Russia, and the need for revolutionaries to educate the people to their own possibilities.[139] Enthusiastic intellectuals took to the countryside in the hopes of alerting the peasants to their revolutionary potential and to the promise of socialism. However, their faith in the peasantry as an untapped political force, already versed in collective landholding and self-government, was shattered when the peasants failed to respond and generally distrusted the intellectuals, turning many over to the authorities. Having failed to arouse the targets of their socialist ambitions, the revolutionaries eventually abandoned Populism and peasant socialism, and instead embraced Marxism and the working classes who were decidedly more receptive to their overtures.

Herzen by this time had alienated both the radicals and the liberals for believing that an enlightened government could fulfill his social aims, while simultaneously advocating radical political ideologies. The radicals were intent on the destruction of the

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[136] Venturi, p. 93.
Malia, *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism*, p. 411.
[137] Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 187.
[138] Venturi, p. 110.
[139] Venturi, p. 35.

entire system and viewed any attempts at government reform, however promising, with disgust for sidetracking their more idealistic goals. Liberals, on the other hand, felt that Herzen undermined the credibility of the intellectuals for his constant attacks on the government and his radical socialist dreams. The historian Granovsky even accused Herzen of exposing his friends to danger by revealing their true political leanings to a government audience.[140] Herzen, who had started out a radical idealist, came to later occupy a middle course, walking the fine line of political agitation towards a revolutionary transformation while warning against haste and violence. He had opened the floodgates of revolutionary activity with his free press but now was unable to slow the tide, for he was increasingly alarmed by the lack of conscience among the radical revolutionaries, and began to fear the worst: that his revolutionary successors would succumb to devotion without restraint, idealism without respect, and violence without purpose. It must be said, however, that the revolutionary intelligentsia Herzen so feared had, in fact, been nourished by his free press, and that without a forum for expression, the movement might not have moved as quickly as it did.

C) Guilt and Moral Philosophy:

Like Belinsky, in the initial stages of his philosophical development, Herzen was seeking the reasons for human suffering in order to atone for his own privileged position. He initially believed, under the spell of German Romantic thought, that an ultimate solution based on rational principles would eventually eliminate suffering. In other words, he had once advocated violent revolution and the full-scale adoption of an idealistic strategy in order to quickly transform the nation before anyone had to further endure the brutality of Russian life. Having "passed through the furnace [of Hegel]," he became an anarchist, seeking the destruction of the old in favour of the new.[141] Early on, Herzen was devoted to revolution and eagerly anticipated the dissolution of the old bourgeois world. In a remarkable passage that speaks rather to the mindset of the revolutionary intelligentsia of the 1860s and 1870s than to the cautious thinker of that same period, Herzen wrote:

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[140] Venturi, p. 92.

[141] Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, pp. 236-237. As noted in the previous chapter, Herzen regarded the study of Hegel as "the algebra of revolution; it frees man to an extraordinary degree and leaves not a stone upon a stone of the whole Christian world, the world of traditions which had outlived themselves... a man who has not lived through Hegel's *Phenomenology*... who has not passed through that furnace and been tempered by it, is not complete, not modern."

> How are you going to convince the workman that he should suffer poverty and hunger while the present scheme of society is undergoing gradual change? How are you going to convince a proprietor, a usurer, a factory owner that he must relinquish his monopolies and privileges? It is hard to imagine such altruism.[142]

Herzen recognized that the populace would not move willingly towards socialism, and therefore called for a revolutionary upheaval to expose all that was vile, cheap, and forced in society; a revolution against the regime, but also against the "privileged liberators of mankind" for, although he had not yet sensed the innocent role of idealism in betraying its proponents, he anticipated the authoritarianism of a revolutionary elite.[143]

> Point to the impotency of its [the old world's] enterprise, the pettiness of its aspirations. Show that it cannot recover, that it has neither support nor belief in itself, that nobody truly loves it, that it continues to exist owing to misunderstanding. Show that every one of its victories is but a blow to itself... What will be the outcome of this bloodshed? - who knows? But whatever it is, it is enough that in this fury of madness, of revenge, of conflict, and retribution, the world which stands in the way of the new man will fall. And this is splendid! So, long live chaos and destruction! *Vive la mort*! And let the future come![144]

These sentiments were characteristic of the revolutionary intelligentsia. A young Herzen not yet schooled in the ways of revolution, did not perceive the difference between those idealists who wanted to uplift the masses to freedom, and those who used idealism as an excuse for petty and spiteful behaviour, taking vengeance on former oppressors and assuming power for themselves. In the European Revolutions of 1848, Herzen witnessed revolutionary ideals devolve into the very same vices against which the struggle was being waged; the leaders of the revolution replaced the old despots, as new actors simply filled the old roles of bourgeois democracy with disparate wealth and freedom. It was then that Herzen realized he had unwittingly been propounding a formula for despotism, hidden beneath his youthful idealism.

Herzen had wanted reassurance that history would eventually give itself over to reason, but as his philosophical evolution turned away from Hegelianism and towards the French socialists, he began to place his faith in man as the driving force of history rather than vice versa. Although Herzen turned from Hegelianism, he continued to appreciate Hegel's rationality against Providence and his serious study of Hegel pushed the intelligentsia to consider practical programmes for Russia's future: "he generated precision in a discussion which sorely needed it."[145] That man's freedom lay in bondage

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[142] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 388.
[143] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 451.
[144] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, pp. 376-377, p. 404.
[145] Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 201, 207.

to the forces of history was at odds with Herzen's new belief that history was improvisation without an itinerary or momentum towards a purpose: "he [man] refuses to be either the passive grave-digger of the past or the unconscious midwife of the future; he looks at history as his free and necessary task."[146] A future shaped by any inescapable law removes man from the process, denying him freedom and responsibility, and therefore the future must be unpredictable.[147] Human suffering throughout history also had to be accounted for: "our age has no monopoly on suffering... you rate too cheaply the suffering of the past."[148] Herzen realized that since humanity was governed by nothing but its own will, it was guaranteed nothing except for what it created itself, and therefore all that made life worth living should not be sacrificed for an abstract future ideal. And that, quite simply, unless man took up the reins of his own destiny he would never feel responsible for the world around him.

> You find it inconsistent that a man who does not believe in future life should intercede for the life of his fellow-men. But in my view he is the only one who can value this transitory life, his own as well as that of others, because he knows that there is none other.[149]

In Paris, 1848, many people had suffered and died for a society in which little had changed and "*Vive la mort*" no longer seemed justified. The ultra-idealistic expectations of a man like Herzen, weaned on pure ideology with all its grandiose promises, could not fathom how mankind could be satisfied with so much less than perfection, dying for ideals that were never implemented on a scale worthy of the cost. Denying deterministic theories of progress, Herzen maintained that the purpose of life was not to wait for a better future but to create a better present through a struggle for liberty, depending not upon Providence but upon the will of the individual. The current generation must not sacrifice its liberty for the sake of its descendants: "We are apt to think that the aim of a child is maturity, because its eventual maturity is inevitable; while the real aim of a child is to play, to enjoy being a child. Should one look for the limits, for the final aim, one will find only death."[150] Why must an entire generation undergo violent degradations so that their children or grand-children should have a free existence, which in truth might never come because it was born out of repressive force? Herzen ceased to believe in the inevitable march of progress, instead desiring a full life for himself and for everyone alive

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[146] Hegel in Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 208.
[147] Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 213.
[148] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 367.
[149] Herzen in Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 221.
[150] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 421.

in the present, without waiting for the guarantees of ultimate solutions. The idea that vast suffering must take place in order to achieve revolutionary ideals became revolting to Herzen but his conscience was torn, for if the present generation deserves liberty as much as the next, how is it possible to achieve that liberty at this very moment without a violent and radical upheaval? Despite losing his deterministic faith, however, Herzen remained optimistic and felt that should man discover his own goodness, outside of society's harmful influences, he would then spontaneously reject religious or secular authority as a meaningless construct, harmful to his freedom and insulting to his ability to govern himself.[151] This could be achieved through education and an awakening of the peoples' senses to innate human instincts towards brotherly behaviour.

Although his theories were spiritually based in fraternal human relations, Herzen did not appear to have had any religious faith. An unsettling awareness of the absurdity of life permeated his writings: "To you, doubt seems something tranquil and easy; but do you know how much a man will give for faith in a moment of agony, weakness, or exhaustion? But where should one find it?"[152] There was a mystery to life that sadly had been either abandoned to science or confined by religion. The relationship between God and man became one of despot and puppet, rather than one of spiritual symbiosis. Herzen respected Christianity for affirming the dignity of all men, by asserting that the aristocrat and the serf were equal in the eyes of God, but the idea of a divine plan did not interest him.[153] Providence merely assigned a divine purpose to the shameless way men behaved towards one another in their economic and social relations. Herzen's faith lay in the people, in their human instincts, for man was his only absolute and he promoted the *obshchina* not because the peasant was better or nicer than the bourgeois capitalist but because he was simply more human in his relations and more in touch with mans' common needs. He was very much like Belinsky in his belief in man's goodness and in his ability to trigger the conscience of the intelligentsia. His philosophical development shadowed Belinsky's in a search for the justification of suffering, a sincere interest in individual happiness, a transition from placing faith in the movements of history to the actions of man, and finally an adherence to socialism as the most complete political and social strategy for preserving innate human instincts towards a freedom simultaneously rooted in *sobornost'* or community. The difference between Belinsky and Herzen,

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[151] Acton, *Alexander Herzen and the Role of the Intellectual Revolutionary*, p. 8, 10, 18.
[152] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 431.
[153] Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 232.

however, was that the latter realized, perhaps too late, that his idealistic strategy for the future did not include a roadmap other than the spiritual awakening of the people, an awakening too incredible to be imminently expected (much like waiting for the Second Coming). Herzen also knew, which Belinsky in his well-intentioned ferocity did not, that their idealism had spawned a terrible devotion to the cause that would be satisfied only with immediate action and thus the expectation of force and dictatorial measures entered the vocabulary of the revolutionary intelligentsia; the will of the elite, and of select members thereof, was becoming increasingly narrow and exclusive and Herzen realized further that idealism was too easy a prey for despotism. The ideals of liberty and equality were too incompatible at this stage in human evolution since man was concerned solely for his own well being at the expense of others, and yet devotion to the cause overrode these concerns on the path to a dictatorship.

D) Herzen's Idealism Versus Democratic-Capitalism:

Although democracy and capitalism have evolved as the historical favourites, Herzen's idealism did not steer him towards the governments and economies of Western Europe and the ideals of representative government. He found that democratic ideals did not match the reality of everyday life, and sensed authoritarianism lurking even beneath democratic idealism. He found great flaws in a system where theoretically every citizen should have the right to be heard and the right to live as they choose, and based on the weight of his idealistic goals, Herzen could not advocate a system he found to be lacking. He had arrived in Western Europe fully expecting to find Russia's future but instead discovered a stage in human evolution worthy of avoidance: "a carnivorous crowd, mad for money, tearing each other to pieces, and starving each other to death, and leaving heaps of their dung and ponds of their spittle on every palace door and altar stone."[154] Herzen found that economic slavery and bourgeois values held Europe in a vice as firm as that of autocracy and anticipated that democratic-capitalism, while more enlightened than the autocratic dictatorship in Russia, still offered only partial freedoms and likewise was fed by it own idealistic fervour, leading to defiant self-superiority. He was genuinely surprised that life in the West did not turn on the enlightened theories of its own theorists: "The political forms of France and other European powers are not compatible with freedom, equality or fraternity: any realization of these ideals will constitute a denial of

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[154] Ruskin in Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 224.

modern European life, will lead to its destruction."[155] Perhaps expecting too much from the cherished ideologies of his youth, Herzen disputed the notion that democracy was the perfect political organization and considered instead that Russia's happiness lay in a natural form of human relations, one outside of the grip of wealth.[156] Herzen's chief concern regarding democratic-capitalism was that while it promised much in the way of equality and liberty, the fact that it turned upon the accumulation of wealth, meant that, in the end, not everyone could be free and equal.

Herzen did not subscribe to the notion that laissez faire would ensure prosperity for all, and that men pitted against each other in economic competition served the greatest good. "He who says love your neighbour and obey the authorities is essentially saying 'obey the authorities and fire upon your neighbour,'"[157] since competition for wealth abrogated brotherly behaviour and fostered selfish individualism in a world of limited resources. Unfortunately, democracy, a political system based on noble ideals, turned on obedience to capitalism, an economic system with inequality at its core. Even democratically elected representatives pandered to the will of the wealthy and carried out their dictates with as little input from the common people as was expected in an autocracy, as the common man was too busily engaged in basic survival to have sustained time or interest in politics. Herzen considered democracy to be an autocracy of wealth, a dictatorship no less insidious for deceiving its slaves of their freedom, extolling ideals that existed in theory but could not be applied in actuality since levels of wealth would always be disparate.

> A cannibal who eats his prisoner, a landlord who collects exorbitant rent, a factory owner who prospers at the expense of his workmen, are all but modifications of one and the same cannibalism. Incidentally, I am ready to defend the most primitive cannibalism: if one man regards himself as a meal and the other is intent on eating him, let him do so. Both deserve what they get: one to eat and the other to be eaten. As long as the educated minority consuming whole generations barely realized why its life was so easy and the majority working day and night did not quite realize that the whole advantage of the work accrued to others and both considered this the natural course of events – the world of cannibalism could stand.[158]

Herzen had no patience for the delusional idealism rampant in democratic-capitalism, whereby in order to succeed, man must compete and make his brother his enemy as a contender for capital (there is after all only so much wealth to go around, and rather than

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[155] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 382.
[156] Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 235.
[157] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 466.
[158] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 384.

share it, it is better to accumulate it). In a small sense, the Russian peasant was better off in an autocracy for at least he was not under any illusion regarding his freedom, he knew he was a slave and would not hold his oppressors in high idyllic regard: "Russia will never make a revolution with the object of getting rid of Tsar Nicholas, and replacing him by other tsars – parliamentary representatives, judges, and police officials."[159]

Herzen wanted every person to experience the full extent of ideals such as liberty and equality, and found democratic-capitalism to be deeply lacking not just for disparities in wealth but also for the values the system engendered: competition as healthy and desirable, weakness as deplorable, and selfish desires taking precedence over common needs. The lies of capitalism reinforced the falseness of bourgeois society, as the self-absorbed, materialistic and conformist middle classes encouraged capitalist behaviour as decent and proper; they were the "offspring of the elegant nobility and the rude populace, the bourgeoisie combines the worst defects of each, yet has lost the qualities of both."[160] Like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Herzen railed against the bourgeois spirit that enslaved man to the power of money: "The bourgeoisie, the last word of civilization, founded on the absolute despotism of property, is the 'democratization' of aristocracy and the 'aristocratization' of democracy."[161] The effect of bourgeois society on the character of man and everyday values was abominable, whereby "material triumphs and material interests have become the obsession of every class and have stifled all other interests."[162] The average man buried his true humane self and strove for a manufactured bourgeois ideal. No longer concerned with being, only with having, man lived on a mechanical level, hardened, disfigured, imagining himself free when he longer even behaved like a man, enslaved as he was by synthetic beliefs and the despotism of wealth and property.[163] The spirit of economic competition chiselled away the spirit of humanity and the harsh hypocrisy of bourgeois life, altered society's values to include survival of the fittest, an uncompassionate and ruthless doctrine:

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[159] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 497.
[160] Herzen in Venturi, p. 27.
[161] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Warning to the Western World (London: The Bodley Head and British Broadcasting Corporation, 1976), pp. 11-12: "I am not a critic of the West, I am a critic of the weakness of the West. I am a critic of a fact which we can't comprehend: how one can lose one's spiritual strength, one's will-power, and possessing freedom not value it, not be willing to make sacrifices for it."
Herzen in Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 225.
[162] Herzen in Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 226.
[163] Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, pp. 226-227.

> What magic words do we need to make the people realize that they alone are to blame for their wretchedness – to explain to them, for example, that there is no need to rob the poor, that it is abominable to gorge within sight of starving people... that it is dastardly to say one thing and do another.[164]

The middle-class philistinism, or *meshchanstvo*, that dominated Europe during the Industrial Revolution turned human beings into markets and commodities, existing only to produce and consume goods for the wealth of others. The common man spent his life in endless labour without thought of developing his soul and mind and engaging in the pleasures of life: "In short, they do everything so that, whichever way a man turned, his eyes should meet either the earthly or the heavenly executioner – one with a rope, ready to hang everything, the other with fire, ready to go on burning everything forever."[165] The people toiled their lives away to acquire goods and accumulate wealth, believing that happiness lay in competition for material security. The Church and State sanctioned ruthlessness and the middle classes were eager to participate without realizing their hand in their own slavery. For their lack of conformity and 'hard work,' the bottom layers of society served as fodder for the system: "their oppression being a prerequisite of our life."[166] A man could cheat his neighbour on the weekdays and pray for forgiveness on the weekend, for he believed that Utopia could only exist in the afterlife and not in his day-to-day existence, and therefore refused to take responsibility for the world around him.

> He has grown so accustomed to hypocrisy, often quite outspoken, that a discrepancy between word and deed fails to outrage him. When he pleaded his weak, villainous nature, the church hastened to give him an easy means to conciliate his terrified conscience through indulgences and confession, lest his despair lead him to some other way of thinking which might not be so easily allayed by prayer and absolution.[167]

The humiliating and dehumanizing effects of bourgeois-capitalism blinded man to the real sources of his frustration and suffering and thus prohibited him from improving the situation. Man had been encouraged to consider himself free when in fact he was enslaved to economy, to law, to social convention, and to ideals: "They are in the grip of customs and are dying of thirst at the edge of the well, never suspecting that it contains water, because their fathers did not tell them so."[168] Even in the West, where every person was considered to have rights and freedoms, millions of people lived with

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[164] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, pp. 352-353.
[165] Herzen in Teryaev, p. 45.
[166] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 383.
[167] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 454.
[168] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 418.

enormous economic and social pressures in their daily lives, technically free to live as they choose, but limited in the options available to them through wealth and circumstance. An illusion of freedom was continually perpetuated, discouraging any need or possibility for change. As long as the common man did not realize that it was on his labour that others were living in luxury, the illusion was maintained: "They do not know that there is no sharper contradiction than that between their ideal and the existing order, that the one must die so that the other may live."[169] Added to low expectations of freedom was a basic disinterest in government, as people were generally content to be led as long as they perceived their interests were being served or there was no viable alternative:

> The masses desire to arrest the hand encroaching upon their daily bread. This is their chief concern. They are indifferent to personal freedom, to independence of opinion. They respect authority and are still abashed by the glitter of overweening power. The man who stands by himself alone is still an annoyance to them. By equality they mean equal oppression... The masses desire a social government which would rule on behalf of and not against themselves, as the present one does. It never occurs to them to be ruled by themselves.[170]

Democratic-capitalism was therefore not idealistic enough for a man like Herzen who wanted the workingman to reap the benefits of his labour, for "the majority will not be absorbed in the work of creating a life of brightness and luxury for the minority."[171] Added to this, Herzen believed that the only way for man to truly be free was to govern himself, and even models of Western European government denied man the opportunity to be in full control of his own destiny; the politician, the priest, and the policeman persisted to enforce the will of the elect. Social and political institutions that represented power disgusted Herzen and he turned against the ideology of the modern State, as an obsolete relic that reflected the infancy of the people and their incapability of governing themselves. A constitutional government held only the illusion of liberty. A socialist federation based on true ethics and morality was the highest form of government.[172]

> I cannot chose between modes of slavery, as I cannot choose between religions... I can no longer distinguish between the subtitles. I cannot say just which sort of slavery is worse and which is better... which is more oppressive: the *honest* republic or the *honest* monarchy.... There is slavery on both sides... Convince yourself once and for all that not a single one of the doomed will escape the

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[169] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 379.
[170] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 451.
[171] Herzen in Teryaev, p. 43.
[172] Teryaev, pp. 46-48.

> hangman: neither the *autocracy* of the Tsar in St. Petersburg nor the *freedom* of the philistine republic.[173]

While he respected the ideals behind democracy, Herzen recognized that they would never be fulfilled to their full extent since the wealth factor would forever prohibit any brotherly action, a necessary component of more idealistic solutions such as socialism. More importantly, Herzen also understood that the autocracy of the wealthy would remain hidden behind the pure ideals of the system and that the average man, swayed by these ideals, would defend to the utmost even his own oppressors.

Since democratic-capitalism has evolved in the Western world as the pinnacle of our political and economic development, it is easy to forget the early horrors of the Industrial Revolution that so terrified Herzen. And even in modern times, disparities exist whereby professed ideals such as equality are suspect (since the poor have less recourse than the wealthy) and liberty is proportional to net-worth. The man employed at the factory, while free to vote and to speak his mind, is not free to structure his day how he chooses, to pursue his interests, to spend his hours fulfilling dreams, for he must first obtain wealth, and the more wealth he accumulates the more his time will become his own, the more liberty he will obtain. He is enslaved to capital rather than to a regime, as wealth dictates lifestyle. Although democratic-capitalism is perhaps the freest system assumed to date, a middle or lower class existence spent in daily toil for the necessities of life still cannot truly be considered the height of human development. As the Slovenian philosopher, Slavoj Zizek, asks: what is really decided at democratic elections, since the basic system always remains the same? With the collapse of communism so too disappeared the belief that there could be a better system as the Western world is again accepting the notion of history as fate, refusing mankind a role in steering social development. It is too incredible to the modern Western mind, that democracy or capitalism could fail or at the very least, might not be the most humane systems our imaginations can conjure, even as our capitalistic-individualist spirit threatens the survival of the developing world. A century ago, debate existed about possibilities for the future whether it was socialism, communism, fascism, capitalism, or a monarchy; while not all these options are appealing and some have proven themselves untenable, there were varying interpretations of how to better human existence. Now the Western world has devoted itself to a singular ideology and bears its ideals as the ultimate solution for other nations. It would appear that not only has democratic-capitalism given up on

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[173] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 403, 412.

improving itself, but it may actually have become hostile to alternative ideas, whether justifiably so or not.[174] The Western world may be succumbing to its own idealism and the freedom of democracy and the opportunity of capitalism have become authoritarian in the notion that there are no viable alternatives. In the end, idealism inhibits our attempts at a free flowing, evolving society outside the parameters of the prescribed solution, as we are free to tinker with the reigning ideology but we are not free to endorse a system that better serves our needs. Herzen realized that this overarching devotion, attributed to idealism, rendered every political system fallible and subject to authoritarian tendencies, including his own socialist solutions. He insisted that no singular ideology should ever possess the monopoly on truth.

E) Socialism, the Vehicle for Idealism:

Like Belinsky, Herzen believed that Russia must avoid the capitalist stage of development and strive for an ideal system of government and economy. Although he realized the impractical nature of utopian solutions based on idealism, Herzen could not help but advertise socialism based on his conscience: "He foresaw the continuation of the awful victory of self-satisfied, liberal and democratic virtue and vice, and all that this implied for the spiritual and physical life of Europe."[175] Herzen doubted Europe's ability to strive for improvement in its social and political life, as it was too exhausted by the weight of its history, too attached to illusions of democratic liberty, and without the will power to believe that life could be any better (a dull political imagination that remains in the Western world).[176] Russia, on the other hand, was ripe for revolutionary upheaval because autocracy was dear to no one except the upper class.[177] The populace was held in place by threat alone, and it only remained for the pipes to burst and for Russia to begin her revolution, and to what end would be decided by Russia's historic attachment to communal traditions and radical ideology. While other members of the intelligentsia advocated either aping the West or regressing into Russia's past, Herzen took a middle course and asserted that by combining Western individualism with Russia's communal tradition, a truly free society based on fraternity and decency could be created.

> Two extreme, one-sided developments have led to two absurdities: to the Englishman, proud of his rights and independent, whose independence is founded on a form of polite cannibalism (Blanqui's definition of capitalism)... How is the

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[174] From an interview with Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek in The New Yorker Magazine: "The Marx Brother," by Rebecca Mead (May 5, 2003), p. 40.
[175] Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 179.
[176] Venturi, p. 33.
[177] Malia, *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism*, p. 399.

> independence of the Englishman to be kept without the cannibalism, how is the individuality of the (Russian) peasant to be developed without the loss of the communal principle? Precisely in this lies the whole agonizing problem of our century, precisely in this consists the whole of socialism.[178]

And indeed, the communism of the twentieth century was not able to preserve individual values, ideas, and freedoms within the collectivized system. Since Russia had used force to achieve collective behaviour, it was necessary to maintain force in order to sustain it, and as the system was not based on free will (the very basis of individual pursuits towards happiness), it could not permit any deviation from the State ideology. Had socialism been achieved through the genuine will of the people, it would not have been necessary to resort to dictatorial measures.

It is worth noting that, besides genuine conviction, Herzen may have been influenced in his socialist theorizing by European arrogance, feeling a strong need to assert Russia's equality as a nation with lessons in humility.[179] Herzen was disturbed by the narrow-minded view the peoples of Western Europe held of Russia, as they were unable to see past the barbaric system of serfdom and would offhandedly dismiss the notion of Russia as a spiritual and social force capable of an enlightened transformation. Herzen sought to alter Russia's image from an ignorant despotic backwater to that of a young nation with potential to be the most liberal and humane on earth, despite its current slavery. Russian backwardness was even promoted as advantageous, for the nation was young and devoid of devotion to any particular form of government or economy. His theories may have been concocted out feelings of inferiority towards the West, but more likely he was simply disgusted that a system as self-serving as capitalism had stolen Europe's heart and now threatened to consume Russia and to destroy the peasant commune, the last vestige of *sobornost'* or unity among men, a sentiment which Herzen sincerely idealized.

Herzen considered that the Russian peasant, largely separated from historical development, had retained a sense of natural human relations, of brotherhood, of community, an understanding that life was about more than material desires, and that cheating your neighbour was indecent no matter the reward. Like the Slavophiles, Herzen idealized the peasant commune, disregarding the fact that the peasants were also subject to human nature and could be cruel, just as the bourgeois businessman could be kind. However, Herzen was not entirely blind to signs of corruption within the commune

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[178] Herzen in Malia, *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism*, p. 411.
[179] Malia, *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism*, p. 410.

and even possessed an uneasy awareness that the peasants might have aspirations towards private property and a market economy. And unlike the Slavophiles, Herzen did not attach religious significance to the commune, but rather was in search of a spiritually based brotherhood of man.[180] Herzen had the ability to glean what was worth saving and what needed to be discarded from Russia's past, and he believed that his homeland had much to learn from the West, that Russia could learn from their mistakes and yet embrace their achievements. He did not want Russia to regress completely into her Muscovite heritage. Modern science and progress were to be incorporated into the traditional *obshchina*, as Russia would learn from Western historical development rather than retrace it, taking what was best from enlightened society and yet avoiding the inclinations towards corruption through decent and brotherly behaviour:

> The past of the Western European peoples serve us a subject of study and nothing more; we do not regard ourselves as the executors of their historic testament. We share your doubts, but your faith does not cheer us. We share your hatred, but we do not understand your devotion to what your forefathers have bequeathed you. We are too downtrodden, too unhappy, to be satisfied with half-freedom. You are restrained by moral considerations or held back by afterthoughts. We have neither afterthoughts nor moral considerations; all we lack is strength.[181]

It was true that there was little to dissuade the Russian intelligentsia from believing in the promises of socialism for they were held back by neither moral considerations, nor ideological doubts, nor even the credulity that often restrains Westerners from utopian thoughts. The Russian intelligentsia were easy prey to the pitfalls of idealism, ferocious in their devotion to ideals and to any system worthy of them, and heedless of the obstacles in their path. Herzen could not pass up the opportunity to put forth his ideal vision of Russia's future, although the roadmap to that future would reveal the authoritarian nature of even his own idealistic theories.

Herzen's understanding of the *obshchina*, or peasant commune, was filtered through his deep opposition to authority and was idealized for its egalitarian operations, free from the interference of the State and bourgeois values. It represented a primitive form of socialism that had existed long before the State, which had arisen in Russian history only for reasons of defence against foreign threats, while the true life of the Russian people had remained in the commune. The age of autocracy and the State was drawing to a close, however, since it had outlived its usefulness from the time of

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[180] Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 242, 249.
[181] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 495.

Catherine the Great.[182] The autocratic government had lost its historical mission, becoming a parasite, a dead weight around the peoples' neck, an institution based purely on repression that did not serve the Russian people who were born anarchists with little respect for authority, whether kings, priests, policemen, or civil servants.[183] A long and bitter experience with state power had engendered distrust of authority and bureaucracy as Russian history was filled with resistance to state interference, evidenced in countless peasant revolts and in the hostility of the Old Believers to church and governmental reform. The common man despised the laws, courts and police, and his instinctive reaction was evasion and non-cooperation.[184] The *obshchina* was the living negation of all authority not based on a voluntary association of free individuals. It symbolized the negation of the State as transcending the individuals who compose it, of law as existing over the will of the community, and of private property as transcending humane purposes for which material wealth ought to exist.[185] To Herzen, the *obshchina* represented ideals of liberty and equality in action, whereby the members of the commune were free to do as they pleased and yet guided by their conscience towards actions that served the community as well as themselves. Herzen's attraction to the peasant commune was the organization of life on simple human principles, without the idolatry of wealth and power.

> The moralists speak of egoism as if it were a bad habit, without questioning whether a man can remain a man if he has lost a keen awareness of his personality, without saying what compensation awaits him in "brotherhood" and "love of mankind," without even explaining why he should be on a fraternal footing with everybody, and why he should love everyone on earth. We see no reason either for loving or hating anything just because it exists. Leave man unbiased in his sympathies and he will find whom he should love and whom he should regard as a brother. Should he fail to do so, it will be his own concern and his own misfortune.[186]

Herzen's peasant socialism suited Russia's unique conditions, her large enslaved rural population, her tendency towards communal relations and distrust of authority, and her ripeness for a revolutionary change. Essential to his idea of socialist liberty was the absence of control from above, as government would be used only as necessary and would not exist as an end in itself. The reconciliation of individual will with that of the community would end "the subjugation of a personality to society, to mankind, or to an

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[182] Malia, *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism*, pp. 399-401.
[183] Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 189.
[184] Malia, *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism*, pp. 402-403.
[185] Malia, *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism*, p. 409.
[186] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 456.

idea."[187] Socialism was meant to increase individual freedom in a system of political and economic egalitarianism that arose naturally out of individual pursuits towards happiness: "In the future epoch... morality, conscience and not the police or public opinion will determine the details of relationships."[188] People would combine in the social context needed, but live as much as possible in free association. Individual freedom was the crux of socialism and absolute control of authority or property whether by the state, the elite, or the commune, would be discouraged, as Herzen predicted that: "communism will sweep across the world in a violent tempest – dreadful, bloody, unjust, swift."[189] And, in fact, the communism of the Soviet era had little in common with the freedom envisioned under Herzen's form of socialism, although it was rooted in the very same idealistic vision.

> There will be no liberty in the world until everything religious and political is transformed into something human, simple, subject to criticism and negation. Logic which has reached maturity finds canonized doctrines detestable; it unfrocks these saints and makes them human; it transforms sacred mysteries into plain truths; it hold nothing sacred and if the republic claims those rights that were held by the monarchy, it despises the republic as it did the monarchy.[190]

The liberty of the Russian people could be achieved in social organization that encouraged individualism through community rather than taming it through absolute authority and "canonized doctrines." Herzen turned to socialism and a freedom that was not based on the will of history but that of the people. Franco Venturi wrote that socialism "seemed to be an explanation of the course of individual human lives rather than of history itself."[191] Herzen could not surrender the individual to the forces of history, as the very essence of life was man's personality and will.[192]

> The personality, this real and true monad of society, has always been sacrificed to some social conception, to some collective name, to one banner or another. While relinquishing his own freedom as an individual, no one has ever paused to question for whose benefit he was labouring, making sacrifices, or who profited by this and who was to be set free.[193]

He asserted that the life of the individual was an end in itself, "at once the boat, the wave, and the helmsman," and that society should exist to serve man, mostly by interfering as

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[187] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 452.
[188] Herzen in Acton, *Alexander Herzen and the Role of the Intellectual Revolutionary*, p. 11.
[189] Herzen in Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, p. 198.
[190] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 374.
[191] Venturi, p. 16.
[192] Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, pp. 206-207.
[193] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 453.

little as possible in attempting to lead humanity towards abstract goals.[194] In contrast, during the Soviet era, man would exist to serve the State and to serve communist ideology, interfering in nearly every aspect of life, to the very thoughts a man held in his head.

The practical solution for balancing individual fulfillment with social responsibility resided in the *obshchina*, which held rights and responsibilities without formal procedure and contracts, in a natural and instinctive form of human relations. Individual rights within the peasant commune or the workers' cooperative (*artel*) were dependent on being exercised and therefore economic slavery was impossible. There would be no complete ownership of property and no centralized government. The primary function of the commune's assembly, or *mir*, would be to arbitrate disputes and to periodically redistribute the land between households, guaranteeing equality and self-sufficiency.[195] The local self-government would consist of independent and spontaneous associations. There would be no communal living or group labour, only free associations of individuals, who would cultivate their own land, enjoy a minimum of personal wealth, and exchange goods and services freely. The worker would enter into a contract out of a sense of obligation or need and would never be forced to act against his own interests. This system had survived in the *artel*, whereby workers entered into agreements to work jointly in various trades for a definite period while preserving their rights as individuals. The longevity of the *obshchina* and the *artel*, surviving for centuries in Russia, had proven that the system would not collapse, as was alleged through lack of productivity or initiative.[196] However, for the system to work, of course, man must recognize that his own interests are best served by pursuing the interests of the community, a recognition that continues to elude even the modern mind.

Herzen's peasant socialism differed from Marxism in both mechanics and in differing perceptions of freedom. Unlike the communism preached by Karl Marx with centralized government and ownership, Herzen desired a free federation of self-governing communes.[197] He hoped the working classes would join the peasants in revolution, but he found the life of the factory worker less idyllic and brotherly than that of the Russian peasant. Marxists would never forgive Herzen's dismissal of the industrial proletariat, as

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[194] Herzen in Teryaev, p. 32.
Malia, *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism*, pp. 424-425.
[195] Malia, *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism*, p. 323, pp. 403-404.
[196] Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 242, 247.
[197] Ulam, *Prophets and Conspirators in Pre-revolutionary Russia*, p. 36.

he perceptively determined that "the worker of all countries will grow into the bourgeois."[198] Herzen could not stand Marx personally, he considered him a "bilious" politician, without humour and compassion, who debated his opponents by abusing them personally. He even accused Marx of spreading rumours that Bakunin was a Russian agent.[199] Herzen was influenced by the French socialists and Marxism appeared to him rather as "Russian autocracy turned upside down," a remarkably accurate prediction of times to come. Marx's attitude towards Herzen was equally hostile; he called him a "Cossack" and refused to appear with him: "I will nowhere and at no time appear on the same platform as Herzen, since I am not of the opinion that 'old Europe' can be rejuvenated by Russian blood."[200] Marxism would eventually succeed over peasant socialism once the peasants proved to have little interest in theories for their development or in rattling the cages of revolution, for Marx recognized the power of industry and the proletariat whereas Herzen devised solutions for simpler agrarian times. Herzen wanted to develop Russian socialism without passing through capitalism, a stage deemed necessary by Marx, and his first concern was for a peaceful and gradual implementation. By awakening the intelligentsia and the peasants through Populism, the people *en masse* might spontaneously or instinctively bring about their own salvation, without violence or bloodshed. The revolutionary intelligentsia were too impatient to see through an "awakening" of the people, however, and the Populist phenomenon gave way to the more attractive and all-encompassing theories of Marxism at the end of the nineteenth century.

The limitations of socialism were also obvious to Herzen, however, as the ultimate freedom of every individual was likely at odds in this early stage of man's spiritual development. At best, one could hope for only as much liberty as is possible in an imperfect world that had long been disconnected from natural and spontaneous human relations. The key to socialist liberation was to develop the human personality before the whole of society: "Were people to desire to save themselves instead of the world, to deliver themselves instead of mankind, how much they could do for the salvation of the world and the emancipation of mankind."[201] A revolution of the human spirit was required in order for man to engage in decent behaviour towards his neighbour. As well, any attempts to forcibly liberate humanity through one perfect political or social solution,

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[198] Ulam, *Lenin and the Bolsheviks*, pp. 52-53.
[199] Judith E. Zimmerman. MidPassage: Alexander Herzen and European Revolution: 1847-1852 (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), p. 227.
[200] Marx in Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, pp. 233-234.
[201] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 446.

negated the possibility of liberation, as all would be forced to resign their desires to a single system. Even while avidly promoting revolutionary potential in the countryside, Herzen refused to market peasant socialism as the ultimate solution to which all else should be sacrificed. He wanted socialism to work out of his idealism rather than his certitude. He believed that in order for a state of egalitarian human relations to arise, it must be spontaneous and natural, and without coercion. If everyone were free to behave decently out of natural inclination and away from the dehumanizing forces of government, religion, social convention, and tradition, then perhaps the best prospect for ultimate liberty could exist. As true and noble as this might have been, the fact remained that Herzen had no roadmap in mind for the transition from an oppressive autocracy with widespread serfdom and illiteracy to a spontaneous socialist revolution without violating the principles of liberty.

F) The Role of Revolution in an Idealistic Future:

Herzen's alternating views on revolution cost him the support of his successors for he was never able to reconcile his longing for socialism with the realization that liberty cannot be installed through brute force. He felt "that every destruction is a kind of creation. Man cannot be content with destruction alone."[202] In other words, he knew that man is compelled to rebuild the idols he has destroyed. The revolutions Herzen had witnessed had not achieved their aims and had rather inaugurated cruelty, intimidation, fear, and inhumanity; allegiances had changed but the essence of allegiance had remained the same.[203] To suppress the bourgeois spirit by violent force would mean that it would merely persist in the new order. If the people were forcibly led to a conclusion, the walls of their new society would be built out of a jail cell: "...they never noticed that the walls of the prison had remained intact. Indeed, they wanted to leave them so and only to put them to another use; as though prison walls could serve the free."[204] Herzen became deeply aware that the people would lose their freedom in the name of altruism, if the revolution were to proceed out of coercion.[205]

> A revolutionary dictatorship, *which must not invent new civil codes or create a new order,* but must smash all monarchist relics in the Commune, the Department, the Tribunals and the Army. It will unmask all the actors of the old

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[202] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 405.
[203] Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 238.
[204] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 379.
[205] Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, p. 201.

> order, will strip them of their cloaks, their uniforms, and their epaulettes, of all the symbols of power which moves people so intensely.[206]

Herzen suffered from the destruction he once advocated, for he was simply too cultured an individual to revel in organized cruelty. He realized the need for revolution, but he also understood the cost of violence and sensed the suffering to follow if society, in this premature stage, were artificially engineered towards socialism. He was opposed to terrorism, conspiracy and violence, preferring peaceful evolution, gradual reform, or any bloodless solutions to the last resort of the axe. Herzen wrote that he had long ceased to thirst for the enemy's blood: "whenever anybody's blood is spilled somebody's tears will flow."[207] Both the radicals and the liberals denounced Herzen for advocating revolution on one hand while warning against it on the other, which was misconstrued as cowardice or indecision. Herzen was a radical early in his career and inspired radicalism in his successors, but the caution of his maturing years alienated the revolutionaries who wanted to forge ahead at all costs without considering that freedom in the present was a prerequisite for freedom in the future. Nicholas Chernyshevsky wrote: "The path of history is not like the Nevsky Prospect, it goes at times through dirt and filth, through swamps and ravines! If you are afraid of being covered with dirt or of soiling your shoes then do not take up politics."[208] Herzen could not side fully with the radicals, the inheritors of his idealism, for he believed that revolution should not proceed out of violence and coercion, but rather from genuine social and political movements. But neither could he agree with the liberals for his conscience regarding the socialist cause was too great: "They will reconcile us with all that we hate and despise, and, by improving, consolidate all that should be thrown overboard."[209] In Russian history, as with Herzen, true liberty found its expression in anarchism rather than liberalism, which was viewed as reconciliation with the old regime. Herzen occupied a category of his own, a compassionate revolutionary, one prone to radical ideology involving a complete transformation in human relations, and yet one ill-disposed towards idealistic strategies for their dictatorial nature as prescriptions. It was a perplexing position to be in and one that the revolutionary intelligentsia were never able to grasp.

Herzen's *Letters to an Old Comrade* (*Pisma k staromu tovarishchu*) written to Bakunin in 1869 gave rise to a controversy regarding Herzen's views on revolution. In

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[206] Herzen in Venturi, pp. 32-33.
[207] Herzen in Ulam, *Prophets and Conspirators in Pre-revolutionary Russia*, p. 33.
[208] Chernyshevsky in Ulam, *Lenin and the Bolsheviks*, p. 53.
[209] Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, pp. 251-252.

the *Letters*, Herzen tamed his position considerably in comparison to earlier works such as *From the Other Shore* (1848-1850), which was full of revolutionary rage. Lenin claimed that Herzen had preserved his loyalty to revolution, while liberals asserted that he broke away completely in favour of gradual evolution.[210] Throughout his life, Herzen did not repudiate revolutionary principles but rather the method of revolution itself. He questioned destruction for the sake of destruction, fearing that it was an end in itself, for the radical revolutionaries seemed more preoccupied with destroying the old world than rebuilding the new: "The people in question are ready for terrible sacrifices, but not for those which the new life requires of them."[211] A socialist transformation was needed but Herzen wanted to use a broom rather than an axe to accomplish the task, to sweep Russia clean of the old idols rather than violently remove them. The transition was too important to be thoughtlessly entered into, without the proper groundwork of educating the people. Herzen's goals were radical: the complete overhaul of social, economic and political relations. However, his tactics were moderate: cooperation where possible, reform, persuasion, education, and the promotion of dignity and reason.[212] Recognizing the authoritarianism lurking beneath their devotion, Herzen wrote to the revolutionaries:

> You are annoyed because the people do not put into practice the ideas that are dear and perfectly clear to you, because they cannot save themselves by applying the weapons you would offer them, and thereby cease to suffer. But what makes you think that it is precisely your idea that the people must effect and not their own, that it should be done at a time you think best and not at another?[213]

And therein lay the trouble with idealism, for it sponsored a devotion so unwieldy that the revolutionaries were wont to disregard the viewpoints of the very people they were seeking to liberate; failing to understand that revolution must be on the peoples' terms, at a time of their own choosing, like an apple falling from a tree, so too must revolution proceed at the proper hour for just as there is no violence done to a tree ready to relinquish its fruit, so too is it possible for a societal transformation to take place when all the participants recognize not only the death of the old system but a new beginning emerging, both logical and natural. It could be argued that in 1905 and 1917, Russia was indeed ripe for revolution, as the old autocratic system was bending beneath the weight of its inefficient bureaucracy, and yet following the revolution, Russia's new beginning did not proceed naturally; burgeoning attempts at representative government and capitalist

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[210] Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 234.
[211] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 380.
[212] Malia, *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism*, p. 413.
[213] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 395.

enterprise were commandeered by the ruthlessness of socialist idealism which would not permit any new beginning except one of the revolutionaries' choosing. The revolutionaries could not wait for the people to decide their future, for their idealistic vision would left up to chance, and the people might favour something else, they might not recognize the one true system, and thus it was necessary to act on their behalf, for the revolutionary intelligentsia, in all their idealistic wisdom, knew what was better for the people than they knew themselves. The people must be forced to be free.

At the end of the day, and despite all misgivings, Herzen always sided with the revolutionaries for, although they had different methods, they were pursuing the same goals. He was firmly devoted to revolution and progress, but he continued to hedge his socialist theories with warnings and reservations about replaying the old forms of government in the guise of something new and better.

> For Herzen, one of the greatest of sins that any human being can perpetrate is to seek to transfer moral responsibility from his own shoulders to those of an unpredictable future order, and, in the name of something which may never happen, perpetrate crimes today which no one would deny to be monstrous if they were performed for some egoistic purpose, and do not seem so only because they are sanctified by faith in some remote and intangible Utopia. For all his hatred of despotism, and in particular of the Russian regime, Herzen was all his life convinced that equally fatal dangers threatened from his own socialist and revolutionary allies... He is terrified of the oppressors, but he is terrified of the liberators too. He is terrified of them because for him they are the secular heirs of the religious bigots of the ages of faith; because anybody who has a cut and dried scheme, a straitjacket which he wishes to impose on humanity as the sole possible remedy for all human ills, is ultimately bound to create a situation intolerable for free human beings...[214]

Herzen was too much of a humanist to side completely with revolution and too much of an idealist to side completely with moderation, he lived out his days eager for revolution but hoping it would be as painless as possible. He was a revolutionary to the end, but a humane one, telling his son: "Better perish with the revolution than seek safety in the alms-house of reaction."[215] Under the ruthlessness of Bolshevism, men like Herzen, those inclined towards moderation in implementing a radical ideology, were condemned and later perished.

G) Idealistic Fathers and Ruthless Sons: The Dispute over Action

During the late 1840s and 1850s, Herzen was among the most radical of his contemporaries, but by the 1860s he found himself, against his wishes, among the more

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[214] Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, pp. 197-199.
[215] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 336.

moderate, advocating conservative idealism and cautioning against revolutionary radicalism. Herzen's intellectual successors were younger, harsher, ruder, more plebeian, more ruthless, and impetuous, of a different philosophical mindset, and increasingly nihilistic in outlook. In comparison, Herzen's intellectual background and romantic interests seemed passé and lordly, for the emerging radicals had experienced the degradations of poverty and injustice that Herzen had only witnessed and read about. Feeling intellectually and socially inferior, the radicals distrusted the gentry revolutionary for his wealth and status, labelling him a phoney for denouncing materialism while living off a great fortune in the safety of Europe. Against the taunts of the younger generation, Herzen was forced to justify his wealth, which he had used to finance political action and to support his press and political refugees: "Money is independence, power, a weapon; and no-one flings away a weapon in time of war, though it may have come from the enemy and even be rusty."[216] Through misdirected class hatred, the radicals lashed out against the progressive element in the nobility that had produced the Decembrists and the idealistic intelligentsia of the 1830s and 1840s, men such as Herzen who had discussed and generated the philosophies that were now guiding the radicals in their actions.[217] The radicals of the 1860s and 1870s were tired of philosophical discussion and talk of tentative government reforms, and felt they had little time to waste in rectifying the situation; everything needed to be discarded and overturned for a new future to begin without delay. Their hostility to traditional culture, to everything that might not be "useful," alarmed Herzen, as he feared where such cultural philistinism might lead, once free human expression was casually discarded in the name of progress.[218] Herzen personally hated many of the new revolutionaries, treating them with irritation, and labelling their bad manners as being leftover from the "servants' room, the theological seminary, and the barracks," in other words, the lower ranks from which the 'angry young men' had arisen.[219] Herzen detected in the radicals: "the oligarchic pretension of the have-nots to be the exclusive sufferers from the social system and to possess a monopoly of the feeling of social injustice."[220] The wounded spirits of the revolutionary intelligentsia rendered them a dangerous group of idealists, for their idealism was rooted in vengeance not only against their former oppressors, but everything associated with

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[216] Herzen in Acton, *Alexander Herzen and the Role of the Intellectual Revolutionary*, p. 23.
[217] Ulam, *Prophets and Conspirators in Pre-revolutionary Russia*, p. 47.
[218] Ulam, *Lenin and the Bolsheviks*, p. 51.
[219] Herzen in Ulam, *Prophets and Conspirators in Pre-revolutionary Russia*, p. 47.
[220] Herzen in Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 254.

them, and the urge to gloat and revel in their newfound power would be too tempting and not easily relinquished.

In contrast to Herzen's *Bell*, the voice of the radical generation was *The Contemporary* and its main critics Nicholas Chernyshevsky (1828-1889) and Nicholas Dobrolyubov (1836-1861) were largely irreverent regarding the "father of Russian socialism." Although they took up his Populist ideas, Herzen was treated as politically ineffectual and his warnings regarding the political maturity of the people and the dangers ahead were met with contempt. The new revolutionaries wanted nothing to do with the government, the gentry, or the status quo in any form, as they believed only in the annihilation of the old regime through whatever means necessary.[221] As Herzen continued to scold the radicals for their haste, ill-placed devotion, and lack of conscience, a personal battle erupted with Chernyshevsky that served to further divide the revolutionary movement. Chernyshevsky visited London, in June 1859, but the two revolutionaries failed to work out a détente in the war of words between *The Bell* and *The Contemporary*. Chernyshevsky wrote:

> What a sharp mind, what a sharp mind, but how far behind the times! He seems to act as if he were still dazzling his opponents in Moscow drawing rooms. But things are moving now with extraordinary speed. One month brings more than what used to take ten years. Look at him closely, at heart he is still a Moscow gentleman [Moscow was associated with conservatism at this time, in contrast to progressive St. Petersburg].[222]

The following year, a letter published in *The Bell*, signed only from "A Russian" but often attributed to Chernyshevsky, warned Herzen to take up the axe.

> No, our position is intolerable: only the axe can liberate us, and nothing but the axe will be of any use... Call upon Russia to take up the axe! Farewell, and remember that for hundreds of years Russia was ruined by faith and the good intentions of the Tsars.[223]

Herzen coolly responded that Russia required a broom rather than an axe, and later vented his frustration with the radicals in an article entitled "*Superfluous Men and Bilious People*" (*Lyshnie lyudi I zhelcheviki*). The superfluous men belonged to Herzen's generation: "we are superfluous because we have nothing in common either with the senility of one world or the infancy of the other."[224] The bilious people were the new breed of radicals:

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[221] Malia, *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism*, p. 415.
[222] Chernyshevsky in Ulam, *Prophets and Conspirators in Pre-revolutionary Russia*, p. 50.
[223] Quote in Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 253.
[224] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 441.

> ...irascible men, sick in soul and body... from the humiliations they had to endure; people who will not look you in the eye, who still exude the bile and poison they had to absorb... who mournfully reproach people for dining without gnashing their teeth and for forgetting the miseries of this world while admiring a picture or listening to music.[225]

The disparity between the views of the two generations can chalked up to the distorting effects of idealism for the theories advocated by Herzen's generation were canonized by the succeeding revolutionaries; the sons were even more idealistic than the fathers but having stretched that devotion to its limits, it revealed itself only as ruthlessness.

The final split with the radicals came in 1866 provoked by an article in which Herzen again insisted that socialism must not be based on coercive force and boldly stated that there had never been any ideological differences between Chernyshevsky and himself.[226] He gave a generous tribute to his counterpart, who had by this time been exiled to Siberia as a revolutionary martyr, but Herzen's failure to decisively grasp revolution had permanently cost him the radicals' respect.[227] His efforts to appeal to them evoked only pity and contempt and in its final years, *The Bell*, the "second government," was disdainfully viewed as a relic.[228] Revolutionary fervour moved very quickly from the 1860s onward, and Herzen could not keep in touch with the pulse of Russian discontent from abroad. His influence with the liberal camp had been equally diminished in connection with the Polish insurrection of 1863, since Herzen supported the Poles' bid for freedom against Russian interests. By doing so he had temporarily won the favour of the radicals, but he was attacked bitterly by the liberals and thereby ended any remaining affection they had.[229] The revolt came at the worst possible time for Herzen, reinforcing his precarious position between radicalism and moderation, and with the government reforms ended and the Polish revolt crushed, Herzen was left with few supporters.[230]

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[225] Herzen in Ulam, *Prophets and Conspirators in Pre-revolutionary Russia*, p. 51. Herzen in Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 255.

[226] Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, p. 256.

[227] Ulam, *Lenin and the Bolsheviks*, p. 52.

[228] Acton, *Alexander Herzen and the Role of the Intellectual Revolutionary*, pp. 177-178. Herzen later attempted to rejuvenate *The Bell* in Geneva as a French journal but without success.

[229] Venturi, pp. 121-128.

[230] "Just when everything was being worked out and in a state of flux... just when the troubles of the government were at their worst, and the Winter Palace was hesitating between liberalism and autocracy: in the middle of all this, the Polish insurrection burst upon us. For us, it was primarily a disaster, and only the prostituted government press can accuse us of having tricked the Poles, by promising them that Russia was ready for a revolution. We knew that nothing was ready, that only the seeds were there... We would have given our blood to hold up the Polish revolution for a year or two. But what could we do...? In any case, the Poles had the right to decide the time and inevitability of their revolution.

Neither camp could understand his contradictory position as an idealist mindful of fateful actions towards an authoritarian regime.

H) The Role of Idealism in Shaping Authoritarianism in Russian Socialism: Alexander Herzen

Believing that Herzen's influence could have saved Russian radicalism from terror, Leo Tolstoy once wrote: "It was a veritable tragedy for Russia that Herzen did not live here and that his writings did not quite reach Russian society. If he had lived in Russia, his influence would have saved our revolutionary youth from many mistakes."[231] However, had Herzen lived in Russia he would not have been able to disseminate his socialist ideas in a free press, that in actuality had suckled radicalism with rabid idealism and revolutionary fervour. Although himself an idealist, Herzen foresaw the emergence of ultimate solutions for Russia that would inevitably descend into authoritarianism. He hated the despotism of formulas and he wanted Russian socialism to be as free from authority and doctrine as possible, believing that the will of the individual should take precedent over all else. He felt just as uncomfortable with democracy's lies as with communism's truths, but for all his influence, Herzen's third alternative of agrarian socialism was never given an opportunity to prove itself. The terror of twentieth-century communism persuaded the world to abandon socialism in favour of capitalism, whereby the wealthy were the new autocrats and the common man was satiated with half-freedoms disguised as true liberty. Herzen once wrote: "Ideals and schemes never come true as we imagine them."[232] And indeed, strong devotion to ideals led the revolutionaries to embrace socialism with a ferocity that terrified even Herzen, twisting socialism into an ultimate solution, a single unalterable doctrine for Russia to live by. Even the loftiest of ideals become degraded when, in its name, power is granted to a segment of the population ill-prepared for responsibility and ready to seek vengeance for its former status. Ideals are also distorted when their very nobleness produces an unhealthy devotion to the cause, and a mindset reluctant to consider other truths and to allow for

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We had to accept their decision and stand on the sides of justice and freedom, and this is what we did." Herzen in Venturi, p. 128.

[231] Tolstoy in Ulam, *Prophets and Conspirators in Pre-revolutionary Russia*, p. 43. Tolstoy would often quote a famous passage of Herzen: "If all our progress takes place only through the government, we will give the world an unprecedented example of an autocracy armed with all the achievement of freedom; of slavery and oppression supported by all the discoveries of technology and science. This would be Genghis Khan having at his disposal telegraphs, steamships, railways..."

[232] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 406.

disparate interpretations and solutions. In their haste to achieve a socialist ideal, the revolutionary intelligentsia were willing to behave as well-intentioned dictators, attempting to install freedom by forcibly taking it from the Russian people, abrogating their freedom to decide their own future. And ultimately, the communist experiment was never able to wean itself from its mother's milk, that of coercive force, and could never sustain itself without it, even after a century of idealistic communist propaganda. As Hèrzen warned, only genuine political and social movements are able to succeed, and even then, the reigning ideology must be free flowing and open to evolution, suggestion, and alternative ideas. There must never come a time when only one solution is available to mankind, however noble that solution may seem.

IV) Conclusion

The authoritarianism of twentieth-century communism was the end result of the idealism that socialism was based upon, for ideals, however well intentioned or utopian, have the power to enslave through devotion and incompatibility with human nature. Throughout history, blood has been shed and people have been imprisoned in the name of abstractions – progress, freedom, equality, the safety of the people – the list is endless but all are based on idealism, a powerful force deserving of historical notice for inspiring people to great acts of violence and change.[233] The inscrutable nature of idealism begins with a noble hope but ends with a singular and definitive solution, narrowly defined and sanctified by truth, that once applied to society, binds human action as strongly as any dictatorship. And in fact, the major political crimes of the twentieth century can be traced to the notion, arising out of idealism, that there is only one correct way to live. By examining the life and works of Belinsky and Herzen, it becomes apparent that idealism led the intelligentsia to an ultimate solution that, due to unyielding devotion and a disregard for free will, resulted in an authoritarian regime. The Russian intelligentsia's search for freedom ended with a dictatorial political system, and if we are to understand this transition from noble hope to forced development, and the consequences of such action, then idealism itself must be examined in further detail. In this concluding chapter several themes are covered, the rise of idealistic strategies as the cure for societal ills in the age of Enlightenment; the concepts of positive and negative liberty and its effect on authoritarian governments; the disintegration of noble hopes into restrictive theory and destructive action; and a reinforcement of how Belinsky and Herzen were but the opening act of this drama in Russian history, the bearers of idealistic promise for the future: one idealist unaware of the consequences of relentless devotion, and the other fully cognizant that life held no certainties or absolutes and nothing justified the suppression of liberty, most especially ideology.

The preceding chapters demonstrated the fervent ideals and sincere compassion of Belinsky, and the profound theories of liberty and community which Herzen developed for Russia, in order to contrast the innocence of idealism with the harshness of its outcome, in this case, a communist dictatorship. Belinsky's blind devotion to revolutionary change was also contrasted with Herzen's awareness that liberty could not be installed through force. While Belinsky represents the purity of the original ideals and

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[233] Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, p. 90.

the beginnings of frustration and authoritarian inclinations, Herzen depicts the contradiction between human interests and the notion contrary to historical belief, that perhaps men do not all want the same things, paired with the elusive understanding that idealism is capable of driving men to unjustifiable action when they believe they possess the monopoly on truth. The idealism evident in Belinsky's social prescriptions and Herzen's theories on liberty is the historical force behind the Russian Revolution and the fuel for the single-mindedness of the revolutionaries, as once a recommendation, even one based on noble ideals, is translated into a command, the change in tone facilitates a change in results. Belinsky's idealism was particularly potent; it provoked the social conscience of the intelligentsia, leading them to embrace socialism as the singular path to Utopia. His emphasis on morality convinced the intelligentsia of a new Christian ethic, one based on pure intentions and human decency, something the West had not adopted in its economic relations with its refusal to acknowledge that differences in wealth negated equality and fraternity. Belinsky's literary criticism gave veiled expression to ideas regarding the dignity of man and the possibility of a better life for every person, while speaking to Russia's suffering through his advocacy of a national literature based on real life. However, it was not solely the lofty ideals of Belinsky that inspired the intelligentsia on the path to socialism, but his fervent devotion to them and his impatience to see the future implemented. And this rabid dedication to the socialist cause transformed the original ideals into false idols, goals that would never be achieved but would continually be praised and used to condone authoritarian measures of every kind, including an out right dictatorship in the guise of socialist freedom. The revolutionary intelligentsia were ferociously devoted to the cause of revolution, for it was absolutely necessary that morality and decency come to pass, and the cost was never too high for a vision so noble. It did not occur to these idealists, that there is an inherent contradiction between fighting for liberty and imprisoning and murdering people for not agreeing with the proper ideology or opinion.

Herzen, too, at the helm of his London-based *Bell* convinced the intelligentsia of the promise of socialism and insisted the time had come for Russia to demonstrate the true path to freedom, both economic and political, in an indigenous vision of the *obshchina* or peasant commune as the future of Europe. He had travelled to the West to escape oppression and to find his faith in European government, but instead found it in Russia's native institutions, in her primitive peasant communes and workers' collectives. And yet even though Herzen embraced socialism, he understood that like all political

ideologies: "socialism will develop in all its phases until it reaches its own extremes and absurdities."[234] In other words, there are no ultimate solutions for all people at all times, and socialism was not a vision to which all else should be sacrificed: "a man looks at something freely only when he does not bend it to his theory, and does not himself bend before it; reverence before it, not free but enforced, limits a man, narrows his freedom."[235] Herzen knew that no distant ends, no appeals to overriding principles could justify social engineering and the suppression of liberty, and that any talk of a universal standard was the prelude to a bloody deed:

> There can be no universal solution, no common standards... Instead of convincing people that they crave precisely what we want, we would do better to deliberate as to whether at this moment they want anything at all. And if they turn out to be wanting something different from what we want, we would do better to concentrate within ourselves, to leave the noisy thoroughfare of life without coercing others and frittering away our energies... Unfortunately, it is not within our power to change the historical relations between individual and society.[236]

A universal solution, a homogenous community and a singular belief, were never elements of Herzen's brand of socialism, and in fact, individual freedom to choose, think and behave as one pleased was pivotal to the system, otherwise it would devolve into a prison, as he considered any government to be that denied individual will. And although he advertised socialism, he largely considered such freedom impossible at that stage in history (outside of the *obshchina* which had retained its sense of natural human relations), as man was still tied to selfish interests, his desires were focused on personal gain without the wherewithal to understand that the good of the community affected his own well being, that it was better to serve his neighbour than to serve himself. In order to succeed, socialism needed to be a popular and natural progression in history but in their haste to achieve the socialist ideal, a haste born out of severe dedication, the revolutionary intelligentsia attempted to forcibly lead the Russian people to Utopia. And the irony of acting as an oppressor in order to relieve the oppressed was not contemplated, the revolutionary intelligentsia were too attached to the sanctity of their ideals, too offended by the notion that they did not have the best interests of the people in mind, and too morally committed to permit suffering to continue in the hopes that the peasants would gravitate towards socialism on their own. However, as it happened, they did understand that a revolution would be violent and bloody, but the suffering incurred would be a

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[234] From Alexander Herzen's *From the Other Shore* in Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, p. 98.
[235] From Alexander Herzen's *Letters From France and Italy* in Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, p. 91.
[236] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, pp. 457-459.

temporary sacrifice on the road to salvation rather than the permanent outlook of continued autocratic subjugation. A small price to pay, and yet, as Herzen predicted, the communist experiment would never be able to wean itself from coercive force, would never sustain itself without it, and the suffering would go on long after the Russian people had been tricked into believing themselves free.

The idealistic belief that man could alter the future through social engineering, whether forcibly or otherwise, originated in the eighteenth century Enlightenment, as all men were believed to favour ideals such as liberty and equality and these interests, born out of human nature, were deemed compatible and capable of producing a free and harmonious society.[237] However, human values, the cultures and experiences that create them, and of course human nature itself have in fact never been compatible and while positive objectives may have universal meaning and acceptance, their translation into human interests is varied and uncontrollable. Yet in the face of unaccountable suffering, the nineteenth-century Russian intelligentsia, were deeply affected by rationalism and the promise of solutions to societal ills. The problems of life were believed to be soluble through rational reforms modelled on enlightened principles, and once individuals were assimilated into a social consensus, conflict and human evil would be swept away. Liberty could be achieved through submission to rational necessity.

> This is one of the most powerful and dangerous arguments in the entire history of human thought. Let us trace its steps again. Objective good can be discovered only by the use of reason; to impose it on others is only to activate the dormant reason within them; to liberate people is to do just that for them which, were they rational, they would do for themselves, no matter what they in fact say they want; therefore some forms of the most violent coercion are tantamount to the most absolute freedom.[238]

By denying the plurality of human existence and demanding a singular solution to conflict, the intelligentsia inadvertently contributed to another dictatorship. As Berlin wrote, human dividedness, not homogeneity, should be the rationale for a liberal policy, one accepting of the conflict between human will and that would maintain these contradictions through a forum of orderly expression; as perhaps democracy ideally attempts to do but with limitations on the scope of liberty, for Herzen envisioned a freedom beyond that achieved in Western society, a liberty without need of Church or State or judgment outside of the local community.[239] Freedom and equality are ideals

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[237] Ignatieff, p. 201.
[238] Isaiah Berlin in Ignatieff, p.202.
[239] Ignatieff, p. 203.

difficult to express in their absolute forms, because as John Donne wrote, "no man is an island, entire of itself," and as such not everyone can do absolutely everything they want at all times, unless men genuinely preferred to act out of a sense of community than out of self-interest. Since this spiritual miracle has yet to occur, Western society has largely attempted to achieve ideals of freedom and equality through commonly defined areas of freedom, for example, the freedom to vote, to worship, of movement, etc., and in terms of equality, as Herzen might say, we are all "equally oppressed" in the sense that we all have the same limitations placed on our freedoms and therefore are equal before the law. The goal of the revolutionaries, however, was the absolute liberty and equality that Herzen preached, a utopia that would only follow a far-reaching spiritual revolution. As Malia writes, this ideal type of socialism was not unlike the DNA of a unicorn, the composite sum of contradictory policies that could exist separately but not together in society – "a beauteous ideological unicorn that itself exists nowhere in reality."[240] The idealistic force of the socialist vision, its beautiful logic, its nobility and sanctity, blinded the intelligentsia to the obstacles ahead, as the core of socialism was not an economic program, but "the moral principle of human equality as the supreme good."[241] And yet, although socialism was largely concerned with negation, obliterating societal institutions in favour of natural human relations (an overriding sense of goodness would dictate people's actions towards one another), some form of public control of wealth would be necessary, and initially, some form of ordering society would be required. Unless the population freely participated in such actions out of a genuine interest in serving their neighbour, socialism would necessarily be implemented from above, and actions would be taken not in keeping with the peoples' preferences, but rather in keeping with a utopian vision that was missing the very thing it required for success: free will. And without free will, and especially in the face of opposition, the revolutionaries resorted to dictatorial measures and later brute force in the name of socialist idealism.

Early theories of Russian socialism predicted a utopian society, if only the masses could be made to understand what was rational to desire, thereby ignoring the fundamental contradiction between giving man the freedom to choose and insisting on what should be chosen. The failure of the Russian revolutionaries to arouse the peasantry to the socialist cause produced an increasingly undemocratic revolutionary egotism, as the

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[240] Malia, *Russia Under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum*, p. 252, 256.

[241] Malia, *Russia Under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum*, p. 254.

masses did not understand what was needed and there was little time or opportunity to educate them.[242] The relationship between the intellectuals and the peasants whom they wished to liberate evolved into a "duel between the free man and the liberators of mankind."[243] The self-appointed minority were working towards a goal without any contribution from the millions of people for whom it was designed.[244] The intelligentsia were not prepared for the peasantry's unwillingness to participate in the Populist movement and chalked up resistance to ignorance and fear that needed to be overcome, even through coercion if necessary. In order for true liberty to succeed, the choice as to what is correct must be made without coercion, which is different than persuasion, a tactic of reasoning and discussion. "Their preferences can be argued with and persuasion is possible, but coercion – in the name of what they might prefer, if they could only see it more clearly – is always illegitimate."[245] According to Berlin, liberty fashioned along ideal human objectives is known as 'positive liberty,' and is evident in many political systems from Marxism to social democracy. Leaving individuals to do as they please provided they do not interfere with the freedom of others is known as 'negative liberty.'[246] While Herzen was an advocate of negative liberty, the Russian intelligentsia sought positive liberty for a mass of people considered unable, through injustice, ignorance or custom, to achieve it on their own.

> These formulas grow into terrible weapons in the hands of fanatical doctrinaires who seek to bind them upon human beings, if need be, by violent vivisection, for the sake of some absolute ideal, for which the sanction lies in some uncriticised and uncriticisable vision – metaphysical, religious, aesthetic, at any rate, unconcerned with the actual needs of actual persons – in the name of which revolutionary leaders kill and torture with a quiet conscience, because they know that this and this alone is – must be – the solution to all social and political and personal ills.[247]

Positive liberty is evident whenever ideology seeks to unlock human potential, or to convince a population of rational behaviour, rather than simply effect the revealed preferences of ordinary people, which Herzen, and later Berlin, insisted must be the limit of practical politics, that in order for an imperfect world to receive as much liberty as is achievable, it is necessary to interfere as little as possible with individual will except

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[242] Ulam, *Lenin and the Bolsheviks*, p. 73.
[243] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 450.
[244] Isaiah Berlin in Venturi, p. xi. For discussion on the ethical concerns of the Populists see pp. xi-xviii.
[245] Isaiah Berlin in Ignatieff, p. 226.
[246] Ignatieff, p. 226. See Isaiah Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty" for a full definition of negative and positive liberty.
[247] Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, p. 89.

when it interferes with the liberty of others. The violation of individual freedom in the name of achieving positive liberty because of idealism can be linked to many tragedies of the twentieth century. This tendency to view the world in one-size-fits-all categories, to expect ideal solutions when humankind itself is far from ideal, was the heritage of eighteenth-century thinkers such as Rousseau and it continues to plague a modern mindset incapable of trusting people to behave humanely if the restraints of society are loosened.

The rejection of positive liberty, an obvious product of idealism, however, does mean that humankind should not dream of a better life, only that it requires the will of everyone involved, and truly involves a transformation of the self rather than of society at large, as Herzen wrote: "Were people to desire to save themselves instead of the world, to deliver themselves instead of mankind, how much they could do for the salvation of the world and the emancipation of mankind."[248] As well, a lesson to be learned from idealism and positive liberty is that the means should not be overlooked to the suit the ends, as the Russian revolutionaries overlooked the resistance of the peasantry and the violence of implementation in order to achieve their dream. Although the intelligentsia shared a common revolutionary outlook, the unresolved question of strategy and tactics splintered the socialist vision into an unrecognizable version of its former self, as the force of its impatient implementation crushed the noblest aspects of the socialist dream. Herzen repeatedly warned that this would happen, as it did in the European Revolutions of 1848:

> Their fatal error consisted in that they were carried away by love for their fellow-man and freedom, by their impatience and indignation. They hastened to liberate the people before they themselves were liberated. They were strong enough to tear asunder the heavy iron chains, but they never noticed that the walls of the prison had remained intact. Indeed, they wanted to leave them so and only to put them to another use; as though prison walls could serve the free.[249]

Berdyaev maintained that the entire history of the Russian intelligentsia consists of the preparation for communism, but because their visions did not include instructions to deal with power, the original impulses of sympathy passed into cruelty when confronted with the mechanics of implementation.[250] Added to this, Herzen and other liberal intellectuals, felt shamed by the radical revolutionary's compassion for the people and could not effectively denounce forceful methods or convince an idealist to adopt a gradual

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[248] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 446.
[249] Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 379.
[250] Berdyaev, *The Origin of Russian Communism*, p. 122.

evolution towards socialism, when the revolutionaries honestly believed they were fighting for something noble, and the more utopian the ideal, the more fervent the dedication.[251]

A utopian socialist society depends on a common spiritual outlook that, rather pessimistically, surpasses anything humanity may as of yet be capable of. Greed, ambition, and self-interest must be replaced by feelings of community and selflessness, while the very essence of existence must be re-examined and ushered away from personal survival towards the greater good. This is a tall order at any time and place in history, but the radical intelligentsia believed Utopia was within their reach and the lure of absolute freedom in an atmosphere of oppression was overly powerful. The quest was too important to be postponed or revised to suit gradual evolution, causing the revolutionaries to reject alternative visions or strategies towards socialism. Although absolute freedom or Utopia have yet to be achieved, select political and social ideals are still imposed upon the 'less enlightened' in a vain attempt at positive liberty, or the one right way for people to live. Social engineering in the name of a better life while amply evident in communism, can also be identified to some extent in every political and social system, as for every gain in social justice or development there is an unavoidable corresponding loss of freedom in another sphere.[252] The origins of communism have been studied from nearly every angle, but the lesson regarding unchecked idealism needs to be reinforced, that despite all good intentions even a beautiful vision for mankind will lead to despotism if imposed on an unwilling, uninterested, or unsuspecting group. As time goes on, every political system inevitably requires evolutionary change and flexibility to accommodate evolving ideals and expectations and, added to this, every political system is inherently self-promoting and will condone corruption in order to preserve its survival; the question thus remains, in the modern period, whether democratic-capitalism will have the flexibility to embrace global perspectives, most particularly in regards to the beleaguered Third World nations and amidst rising tensions in the Middle East, as even now the contradictory notion has arisen of relinquishing civil liberties in order to preserve democracy.

On a final note, it is important to evaluate the early ideals of Belinsky and Herzen, independently from their outcome, not only for content but also for the degree of devotion that altered meaning and intent. The ideals behind socialism might have

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[251] Ulam, *Lenin and the Bolsheviks*, p. 82.
[252] Ignatieff, p. 198.

produced the most egalitarian political and social system ever known, if only mankind had been permitted to pursue those ideals at its own pace and preference. Instead, these ideals led to the belief that socialism was the only path to liberty, and once it was adopted as the ultimate solution, the path to authoritarianism was open. However, having considered the ill effects of idealism, and the dangers it poses if left unchecked for fervent devotion and incompatibility with human interests, it does remain that the original spirit of Belinsky and Herzen was widely at odds with the end result, and it is possible to examine their political thought outside of its consequences. The communist experiment has overshadowed the earnest efforts of the intelligentsia to create a better world, and Russian socialism has been judged by its final translation into action, rather than on its own merit and in its own historical milieu. This is a disservice to some of the most uplifting and spiritually-based political thinking ever undertaken, deserving of its own appraisal as historically linked but also independent of twentieth-century communism. The idealism of early Russian socialism should be allowed to speak to its own aims, as having been capable of producing something other than it did. In other words, while idealism placed the Russian intelligentsia on the path to an authoritarian government, there was a moment, before severe dedication and contradictory human nature took over, that their ideals held promise for the future. If the sincere compassion of Belinsky and the liberal theories of Herzen could be embraced, and if idealistic strategies were approached with scepticism and flexibility, but not with cynicism, in other words with a cautious optimism, then perhaps we could begin to transform society, gradually and peacefully, in a way in which everyone could have a chance at happiness. The lesson of idealism as a crucial force capable of bending nations to a singular will, need not frighten political theorists away from contemplating a better future, it need only warn them to pay attention to any sign of a monopoly on truth. For whenever one nation, or even one person, feels as though they possess the monopoly on what is good for the people, a good that the people have not yet realized, and that this vision should be implemented despite the obstacles, then liberty is in danger. This warning against absolute truth, a product of idealism and insidious for its innocence and well meaning intentions, should always be in the back of the minds of political theorists and of anyone who feels they know how people should live. Strive for a better world, indeed, but realize that the most liberty can be attained in a world where each person is allowed to pursue his or her own interests and preferences as much as possible. The goals of this thesis then were to present early idealism in its most innocent stages, to contrast the noble hopes of Belinsky and Herzen

with the well-known outcome of communist history, and to pinpoint the dangers of idealism by paying heed to how easily ideals are led astray through unyielding devotion and conflicting human interests. However, this thesis is not only intended to serve as a warning, but as something uplifting, in the knowledge that the potential for an ideal society begins only within ourselves, that our responsibilities to mankind reside in personal and individual transformations towards noble behaviour and that, in the end, a completely free society cannot be achieved from above but only from within, an uplifting notion that each of us has the potential to unlock the key to Utopia.

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